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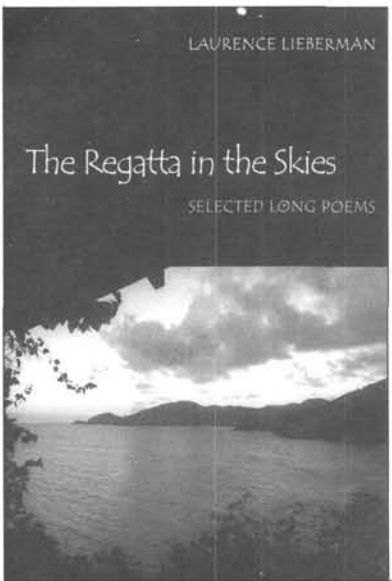

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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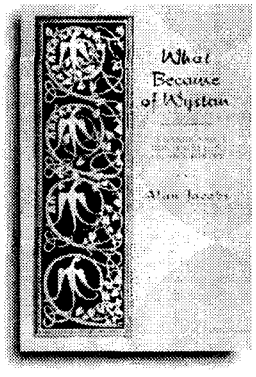

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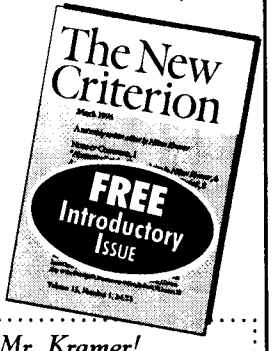

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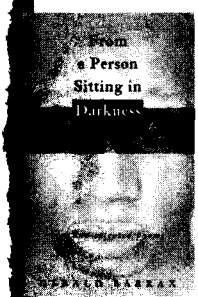

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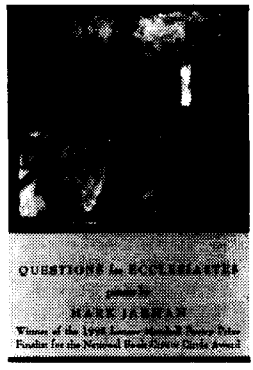

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ANDREW HUDGINS

The Secret Sister

When I was between ten and fourteen, I was perturbed that my life wasn't like the lives of people in the books I read. From the Hardy Boys to Penrod to Hercule Poirot to, hell, Brighty of the Grand Canyon, they possessed more understanding of the world than I did, and more insight into the nuances of other people's words and gestures. Their lives were full of precisely resolved drama that vibrated with significance and meaning. Though I dimly knew I didn't want a dump-truck load of drama rumbling into my life, I envied the characters a tumult that was rich with possibilities for heroism, adventure, and psychological acuity. Mostly it was the understanding I envied, the book-people's ability to perceive the motivations behind each other's words and actions. Reading books, I could pull the characters' understanding over my head like a sweater and wear it as my own. The people I read about were teaching me how to think and feel, but in my life outside books my parents' actions were still as inscrutable as Sanskrit and the intentions of my brothers, relatives, classmates as unfathomable as the Mariannas Trench, which I had read about in *My Weekly Reader.*

At ten, I remembered how, when I was just four, five, six years old, I'd sit under the kitchen table and listen intently while Mother and her friends, other service wives, drank coffee, smoked, gossiped. While I stacked my brightly colored wooden blocks into elaborate towers, raced Matchbox cars around and through them, then toppled the precarious skyscrapers, the women talked. They cooed, their voices husky with amazement: "No, you don't mean it!" And someone archly replied, "Yes, Honey, I mean it. Mean it, I do."

They laughed, they hooted, and, because "little pitchers have big ears"—significant flick of wise eyes in my direction—they whispered. They droned earnestly about friends and relatives, promotions and transfers, annoyances and outrages. Though I

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loved the music of their talk, I was fascinated by the lyrics because I could not understand them. Sliding on my bottom, I scooted across the carpet to my mother's feet and, making myself as inconspicuous as possible, I strained to follow the women's conversation. When Mom looked down and saw the look of absorbed concentration on my face, she began to edit her comments: "You remember what we were talking about the other day? Betty and the . . . ? Yes, that's what I mean. Well, today Shelly told me he'd done it again, somewhere over by the commissary." Though her careful obscurity foxed me, the people in books would, I was sure, have penetrated it as easily as Sherlock Holmes interpreted partially dried mud stains on the brim of a delivery-man's cap.

But in one crucial way, my life was like the lives of the people in books. I simply didn't know it yet. Though I'd had clues.

All my life—and I'm forty-seven now—I've received *Woodmen* magazine. My subscription began before I was born, but only when I was ten or so and reading steadily did my mother feel obligated to give me the issues. I was lying on my bed, reading comic books, when Mom came to the bedroom door, the day's mail clutched in her hand. "Here, this is yours," she said, and tossed the magazine at me. Mail? Me? I never got mail. I was a kid.

Her voice was studiously neutral—a tone that set my nervous system on high alert.

She stood in the doorway, staring back and forth between the magazine and me, her body clenched so tight she trembled.

I picked up the magazine. "What is it?"

"Just take it. It's yours," she snapped, and left the room.

What had I done? Trying to figure it out, I read the *Woodmen* carefully. I studied it and puzzled over it.

Woodmen is published by The Woodmen of the World, a fraternal insurance company based in Omaha, that sells insurance primarily in rural communities. The magazine was filled with articles about local Woodmen of the World lodges, articles accompanied by many pictures of lodge members standing in front of American, state and lodge flags, staring blankly into the lens of an unseen member's Brownie Automatic. Between vaguely inspirational and patriotic articles about the importance of Arbor Day, Flag Day, and the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, *Woodmen* sandwiched longer and more insis-

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tent—nearly impassioned—articles alerting me to my insurance needs. They luridly detailed the unhappy consequences sure to befall those who turned their backs on home, auto, term life, and disability insurance.

My careful study of *Woodmen*, my detective work, failed to answer my questions about why I received the magazine and why its arriving at the house made my mother act so peculiar. Uneasily, I wrote her anger off as yet another adult act that, for all its apparent irrationality, grew out of a reasonable adult calculus beyond a child's comprehension—like the acts of God, which I was told at church would in the fullness of time be revealed as just, wise and loving. Only much later did I learn that my subscription to *Woodmen* began when my parents, before I was born, bought a burial insurance policy in my name. If I died, they wanted to have the money to bury me.

Around the same time—we were living then in North Carolina on Seymour Johnson Air Force Base—I had to take my birth certificate to school and show it to the Pee-Wee League officials before I could sign up to play baseball.

"What's your birthday, son?" asked one of the men.

"April 6, 1951, sir." If there's one thing a kid can be counted on to recite confidently, it's his birthday.

The man looked puzzled. "No," he said. He turned the paper around where I could see it and pointed at the date. "It says on your birth certificate it's April 22."

When I ran through the carport and shouldered open the kitchen door, Mom stood at the sink, peeling potatoes and carrots for supper. Spring sunshine poured through the kitchen window, and her face glowed in the soft light. Without turning her head, she said, "Hey, Kiddo. How was school?"

"Hey, Mom—my birth certificate is wrong."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It says my birthday is April 22."

Mom turned and stared at me, her mouth gaping.

"It says April 22, not April 6, like it's supposed to."

Her mouth began to work wordlessly until a choking sob broke from her throat. She threw her wet hands over her face and ran from the room, water streaming down her elbows and onto her blouse.

I couldn't imagine what I'd done. The faucet was still running. Maybe she meant to leave it on. Maybe she'd come right back. I

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stood still a long time, waiting and thinking, before I turned off the faucet. The potatoes and carrots, half peeled, huddled atop one another in the sink, glazed with cold water.

I tiptoed down the hall to my bedroom. As I passed the shut door of her bedroom, I heard Mom crying. I stopped and listened to her fighting for control. She gasped, trying to hold the sobs down, but they forced their way up her throat and burst out in long rhythmic wails. I crept on down to my room and closed the door.

What had I done? Should I ask? Should I go apologize even if I didn't know what I was apologizing for? That might make things worse.

Later, her face red and swollen, exhausted from sheer exertion, Mom tapped on my door, stood in the doorway, and apologized for getting so upset. My birth certificate, she said, was right. She had simply misremembered when my birthday was. She was sorry. Next April 22, she baked a Duncan Hines yellow cake and topped it with a cocoa-powder icing—my favorite. Inspired by a tip from *The Ladies' Home Journal*, she wrapped nickels, dimes, and one quarter in waxed paper and tucked them into the cake for me, my brothers, and our friends to find. And thus my birthday changed from April 6 to April 22 with my hardly noticing the shift. Sixteen days, what difference did that make to me? I was a kid, and didn't pay attention.

If I had paid attention, maybe I wouldn't have given in to fits of boyish petulance, complaining that I wasn't loved enough, given enough toys, allowed enough freedom. I even hurled at my mother the great slogan of sullen children: "I never asked to be born." It's meant to absolve the speaker of all responsibility because it assumes that only those who did, in fact, request to be born can be held accountable for their actions, while implying that his birth was the result of some caprice, carnal whimsy, or solipsistic act of self-replication on the part of his parents, who merely wanted a worker to mow the lawn for them.

Mom would have none of it. If she was washing dishes she'd stop and wipe her hands. If she was sewing, she pushed back from the machine, leaving the needle poised above the fabric like a threat. If she was vacuuming, she'd drop the hose, snap the vacuum off, and walk over to me. She'd stop right in front of me, grab me by the shoulders, stare into my eyes, and say with hushed

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ferocity, "Nobody ever wanted a child as much as I wanted you. Nobody." She shook my shoulders for emphasis.

"The doctors all wanted me to get rid of you, but I told them I'd have this baby even if it killed me. I didn't want to live if I couldn't have you."

Her face was intense and determined, her eyes fixed on the distant past, as if she were once again having to stare down idiot doctors who couldn't understand how much she wanted me, how much she would suffer to bear me.

"Why, Mom? Why'd they want you to get rid of me?" The idea of a therapeutic abortion was beyond me. I was remembering stories I'd read about Spartan women abandoning unwanted or malformed babies on the mountainside.

"Because I was in such bad shape. Because they thought having you might kill me." She went back to what she'd been doing—washing, sewing, vacuuming. But I followed her.

"Why were you in such bad shape?"

"I just was. But nothing was going to keep me from having you, so it doesn't matter what was wrong with me. Go do your homework."

"I've done it."

"Then go over it again and make sure you did it right."

I squirmed miserably, overwhelmed by the passion and suffering in her love for me. But I understood that it wasn't me, the essence of me, my personal identity, that she loved first and so ferociously, but the idea of a baby. The baby that became me. I was loved first because I was her child, not because I was Andrew or because of anything I'd done or could do to merit her love.

Until I was thirteen, I thought Mother's insistence on how much she wanted to have me was simply her way of telling me how much she loved me. And it was that, but not simply.

During the three years that my father was stationed at Norton AFB outside San Bernardino, California, and I was in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, my Grandmother Rodgers twice flew out from Georgia to stay with us for month-long visits. I must, therefore, have been about thirteen when, with my parents off shopping for groceries at the base commissary, Grandmomma summoned Roger and me into the back bedroom. Mike, the youngest, was sent outside to play.

She shut the door, eased her bulk down onto one bed, the

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mattress bowing underneath her weight, and gestured for Roger and me to sit on the other bed, facing her. She plucked at the bodice of her dress a moment or two.

"Do you know you have a sister?" she blurted. She stared into my face, then Roger's, to judge how we reacted.

I thought she was joking. Of course I didn't have a sister. I'd have noticed. We sat and stared, waiting for her to continue.

According to Grandmomma, Mom and Dad had driven with Andrea, who was about two and half years old, to Griffin, Georgia, for Christmas. (Andrea! While Grandmomma talked, I mulled that name over and over: my name, my father's name, transformed into a girl. And if she'd lived, I'd have been somebody else, named somebody else.) Going home, they'd tried to save money by pushing straight through from Georgia to Fort Hood, Texas, where my father was stationed. In the small hours of the morning, somewhere in east Texas, Mom, driving while Dad slept, hit a patch of ice. Sawing the wheel back and forth, she fought to control the fishtailing car, which shot off the road and into a field, catapulting Andrea through the windshield, killing her.

Dad said nobody in the world could have handled the sliding car better than Mom had, Grandmomma told us with a defensive edge to her voice. Even at the time, a seventh grader and not an especially perceptive one, I recognized that my father had lied, lied to exculpate Mom and lied to himself so they both could think of Andrea's death as an act of God in which Mom had played only a secondary role and played it well. This lie has been one of the moral touchstones of my life.

For years, while I admired my father in secret for his brave dishonesty, I excoriated myself because I wouldn't have had the presence of mind to tell such a thoughtful lie. And even if I did find the decency and imagination to tell the good lie, I lacked, I knew, the self-discipline to stick to it in the turmoil of grief. In his place, I could not have restrained myself from lashing out at the woman who drove the car. Or so I thought when I was thirteen and for many years afterward.

My parents, Grandmomma told us, regarded Andrea's death as God's judgment on them. Because they had loved her so much, they had, in effect, worshiped her. They were guilty of the sin of idolatry, and God had struck her down to punish them.

Above her bedroom fireplace, Grandmomma kept, she said, a

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large, studio photograph of Andrea. When we came to visit, she took it down and hid it under the bed because Mom couldn't bear to see it. Hadn't we noticed how that large area of the wall was strangely bare?

No ma'am, we hadn't.

When Grandmomma finished talking, she let out a large huff of air and plucked at the front of her dress, as if she were hot. She looked at us, expecting us to say something. What could we say?

Grandmomma swore us to absolute secrecy. We must never let our parents know that we knew about Andrea. If they found out she'd told us, they might never let her come visit us again. But we had a sister. We had to be told.

Roger and I kept our vows so diligently that we didn't discuss Andrea even with each other until we were adults. But at the time I hardly paid any attention to my own promises. My brain was racing—remembering, sorting, reinterpreting. "Do I believe her? Do I believe this wild story of my ordinary, everyday parents having a secret life of grief, guilt and suffering?" "Yes," I answered. "I do."

But I also wanted to see the evidence. A year or two later when we were staying with Grandmomma on our way from California to a base outside Paris, I looked under her bed to see if she really did have a picture hidden there. I pulled the photograph out and studied it. I tried to find a family resemblance, a psychic link, between Andrew and Andrea. I yearned to get some sense of her as a person, a sister, a predecessor, a double, a spiritual intimate. From the photograph, a child in a frilly starched dress laughed past the camera—a child's open-mouthed laugh, quizzical and tentative. She was just a little girl. She could have been any little girl. Disappointed and embarrassed, I pushed the picture back under the bed, taking care to place it exactly where I had found it.

Once I knew about Andrea, incidents that had been inexplicable now began to assume meaning. The *Woodmen* magazine. Even my misplaced birthday. I understood instinctively that my mother had confused my birthday with Andrea's.

Andrea's death explained why, as soon as seat belts were made available as retrofit kits, my father had bought four sets of them and in a muttering, sweating rage spent an afternoon installing

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them. He cut slots into the green vinyl-covered seats of our Chevy Impala wagon. From a careful distance, we watched him wrestle the bench seats out of the car. After drilling holes in the floor pan, he bolted the seat belt anchors to the frame of the car. Whenever my brothers and I got in the car, he checked to see we were buckled in, tugging at the belts, cinching them so tight we could hardly breathe.

Learning about my sister also threw a sad and subtle new light on how Mom responded when acquaintances asked her how many children she had. "Three," she said, or later, after Timothy was born, "Four." "All boys," she invariably added, then laughed. She laughed with a peculiar quality I'd recognized as peculiar, though I couldn't penetrate it. A strange note played against the amused, rueful tone of a woman mocking herself in front of other women whom she could count on to understand her plight, trapped in a house full of crude and brutish men. In retrospect I could hear a touch of giddiness in her lie, a giddiness that might have soared into hysteria if she had let it. I knew she got frantic at funerals. On the rare occasions when she absolutely could not avoid them, she broke down sobbing the moment we entered the church and continued crying and gasping for air in the car, at the graveside, and for hours after we had driven home. Her weeping made me feel detached and uncaring—a cold fish—because I didn't grieve as strongly as she did, but it also frightened me to see her sag, collapse, and cling to my father, her wet face tucked against his shoulder as if she were trying to hide it. Despite how she must seem in these pages, where I'm writing about widely spaced incidents that radiate from the most traumatic event of her life, my mother considered herself a trooper, not in the theatrical sense but the military sense. She was not one to put her emotions on public display and she distrusted those who did—an attitude that made her breakdowns all the more frightening to me.

These memories and perceptions, in some inchoate form, surged through my mind as I sat on the bed, absorbing what Grandmomma had told us. Her revelations explained too much to be brushed aside. I believed her. My next thought was, "Wow, this is just like something in a book!" My parents' lives and, by extension, mine suddenly possessed drama, heartbreak, violent death, and deep-buried family secrets—and I like a character in a

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book was unexpectedly entertaining insights into why the people around me acted the way they did. I'd yearned to have insight, and now I could see with fascinating clarity the psychological maneuvering that wound around the decency of my father's good lie. And I could see how my grandmother's vehement insistence that her daughter was not to blame for the accident made me doubt that my father had told her the whole story and doubt that she was telling me the whole of what she had been told. I could comprehend the despair that drove my parents' spiritually perverted yet utterly natural attempt to create meaning for Andrea's meaningless death. I was amazed—thrilled!—to find myself living a scene of revelation and epiphany—and ashamed of myself for reducing my parents' lives and mine to literary tropes.

Though I knew I would reduce and devalue my mother and father by thinking of them as characters in a book, they have left me no choice. Until Grandmomma told me about Andrea, my parents had never breathed a word about her, and only much later did they speak of her at all. When I was in my early twenties, my mother two or three times mentioned Andrea in passing, quickly, tentatively—testing me to see if I knew what she was talking about. When I was in my middle twenties, my father began on rare occasions to mention Andrea when her life helped pinpoint time: "That was in Florida, right after Andrea was born." "Andrea was just about a year old when we moved to Texas, but she traveled really well for such a tiny baby." These comments, too, seem slightly contrived to me. I think he is trying to tell me I have a sister, trying to remind me of what he has never told me. Trying to help me remember what I don't truly know. That is the extent of what I have learned about Andrea from my parents' lips.

My parents' silence, augmented by Grandmomma's swearing Roger and me to silence, forced me to approach them as if they were literary characters because in a real way that's what they are. In life you don't have to speculate why people do things; you can take them aside and ask, and then adjust your understanding according to how they reply. But with literary characters you must interpret from the limited evidence given to you in the book. Since I could not ask my parents about Andrea, I've become their interpreter, an interpreter whose attention they would have resented if they had known I was studying them, though, again like characters in a book, they seemed unaware that I was their

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reader, analyzing them, interpreting them, speculating about them. And like a literary critic I have continued to adjust my understanding of my text—my parents and their daughter—as new facts come to light.

A couple of years ago when my wife and I were in Atlanta, visiting my brother for Christmas, I mentioned that the only picture I'd ever seen of Andrea was the one Grandmomma kept on her bedroom wall. Roger stood up, left the room, and came back holding a small framed photograph. All my brothers were familiar with this picture but I'd never seen it before. As talk, insult and laughter volleyed across the kitchen table, I stared at the photograph, transfixed and strangely reverent. In it, Andrea, at what must have been her second Christmas, when she was twenty-one months old, sits on the floor in front of the Christmas tree. She is almost completely encircled by my parents. Their shoulders touch affectionately behind her and their knees nearly complete the circle in front. Andrea's mouth is parted in laughter and her large dark eyes are focused hard to her own right, anticipating more silliness from some aunt or uncle who is trying to get her to look up and laugh for the camera. There's a slight wariness in her look, but it's the wariness that precedes pleasure. She knows she'll be delighted again soon, any second now. It might involve *tickling*, though, and she'll keep her eyes peeled for that.

But it isn't Andrea who commands my attention, my strange reverence; it's my parents. These aren't the people I know. These aren't the driven, fearful, angry, and often grim people who raised my brothers and me. The sleeve of my mother's mock-turtleneck sweater is pushed to her elbow, revealing a powerful forearm. Her right hand clasps Andrea's thigh, holding her in place for the camera. Mother looks frankly into the lens, a large, easy smile lighting her face. Though the viewing angle and the large plaid of her wool skirt make her hips look huge—perhaps she is still heavy from bearing her first child—I can see the taut tomboy build that she was proud of.

While my mother looks forthrightly ahead, my father looks down at Andrea. All the camera captures of his eyes are the lids, which makes him look as though he's praying. His thin lips even seem to move slightly, the way they do when he is reading his

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Bible. Everything about his face looks reverent, radiant with pleasure in his daughter. I've only once seen that look directed at me, and that was when I was born again and stumbled down the aisle to join the Southern Baptist Church. Looking at the photograph, I felt a stab of jealousy for Andrea, so clearly adored by her parents, and her parents so clearly relaxed, confident, and happy. Happy! I never saw my parents look happy. Oh, they laughed and made jokes occasionally, especially my mother. But not to be melodramatic about it, they were sad people, with some fundamental capacity for joy drained out of them. Looking at the photograph I understood at a gut level something I had understood only on an intellectual level, ever since Grandmomma had told us about our secret sister: all my life my parents have been grieving.

I already knew that in looking at Andrea I was looking at the person who had determined much of my life and outlook. On a level far beyond words, I have absorbed my parents' belief that the world is out to get me. They hovered over me, watching, watching, watching. But was it me they were watching, or the predatory world that was forever waiting for another opportunity to spring out and take one of their children? "No, you can't cross the street; it's dangerous." "No, you can't eat a corndog at the fair. You don't know who touched it or where their hands have been." "Just who is going to chaperone this field trip? Well, if I let you go I want you to stay near the teacher and don't leave the group. A dairy farm is a dangerous place." I grew up a fearful child, and consequently an angry one. To this day, my first reactions to most new situations are fear, then anger—all filtered through a pervasive low-grade paranoia that is finally abating. It has required a lot of self-monitoring for me to comprehend this emotional pattern and make allowances for it.

At Roger's kitchen table, looking at the way my father looked at Andrea, I began to grasp how his love might have seemed so excessive as to have tempted God's hand. And I understood, too, the corollary to that belief: if his idolatrous love had caused God to strike down Andrea, then wasn't he, in a direct and undeniable way, the murderer of his own child? I began to understand why my parents, though they hovered over me, protecting me from a hostile world, weren't demonstrative in their affection. Much of their capacity for joyous love had died with Andrea, leaving only

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the fearful kind, but they also didn't want to show their love too openly because they had done that once before and reaped the consequences. They wanted to keep me alive.

Late last year, my cousin Julie Carmean, who was finishing her doctorate in theology, sent a copy of her dissertation to my wife. Erin read it and passed it on to me, saying, "There are some things about Andrea in this you'll want to read."

Julie takes on the pivotal religious question of theodicy—why does God allow evil in the world?—and in her introduction to the manuscript she writes about several events underlying her intellectual fascination with this question. One was being sexually assaulted when she was in high school. Another was the death of her father in a terrible, freak car accident.

But the story that Julie grew up with, the one that first brought the vexed theological issue of theodicy to her mind, was Andrea's death. In the story Julie heard, my mother, tired because she and my father had driven all night, fell asleep at the wheel, and the car veered off the road. In the wreck, Andrea was flung from the car unhurt. "There wasn't a mark on her," Julie was told, except for one: The accident had dashed Andrea from the car and into a barbed-wire fence, which cut her throat.

Learning these new facts from the pages Julie had written for her exam committee was a strange and eerily literary experience. I find it, though, natural to resort to literary criticism to grapple with my cousin's version of the story. Isn't it, in addition to everything else, a story that is moving from oral transmission onto the printed page? And in the oral tradition, we're familiar with different tellings of the same basic plot, as in the many variants of folk songs, such as "Barbara Allen" and "Frankie and Johnny." Or the motives of different storytellers can be preserved side by side, like the original pagan voices and the later Christian voices in *Beowulf* that quarrel over how the poem should be told and what it should mean. In this case, Julie's version sounds closer to right that Grandmomma's. While my mother certainly could have lost control of the car on a patch of ice, her falling asleep makes more sense of both stories' insistence that my parents had driven all night. But maybe I'm being too literary: The writer always prefers a story in which events rise from human action, not chance. We can tolerate a good deal of apparent meaninglessness in our lives because we have grown accustomed to it, but why bother reading

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novels, poems, stories, or plays if they are meaningless? If Mom fell asleep, she was responsible for Andrea's death. If the road was icy, no one was to blame and Mom stood innocent in her mother's eyes. My father lied to protect my mother and told, I suspect, a truer version of the story to his brother, whom he could depend on to understand his grief, sorrow, guilt, and despair.

I'm a little skeptical of the new and horrifying detail that Andrea's throat was slashed on barbed wire; it smacks of the storyteller's delight in the vivid and peculiar. But barbed-wire gash on Andrea's throat might explain why my mother, when the subject of funerals came up, insisted that she wanted a closed-casket service and I was to make sure that under no circumstances was my father to display her body. Then, surprised at her own vehemence, she'd stop, laugh, and say that if I didn't do what she asked she'd come back and haunt me.

The romantic—or is it gothic?—detail that, except for the wound on her throat, Andrea didn't have a mark on her is the only part of Julie's story that I am actively dubious of. Though it's possible that a child could be pitched through the windshield and onto a barbed-wire fence without being bruised, cut, and scraped, it's unlikely. The fabrication that was meant to spare the sensibilities of the grieving relatives actually, in my imagining, makes the gash in the baby's unbroken flesh more vivid, more violative, more horrible. It gives the imagination one detail to focus on and conjure with—and as I think on it the single slash across the throat makes Andrea's death seem less random and more purposeful, more like a murder or a ritual sacrifice than an accident—the way Isaac's corpse would have looked if God had not, at the last minute, stopped Abraham from doing what he had ordered him to do.

Almost every week of their working lives, ministers like Julie have to comfort people through personal tragedies like sexual assault, the death of a parent, or the death of a daughter, and in her discussion of theodicy my cousin is reduced, by what she has heard and experienced, to arguing that God possesses only partial control over human actions and the world. It is one of the few logical paths open to her. If you posit that God is all good and all powerful, there is only one way to reconcile those beliefs with the presence of evil. That is to deny evil exists by insisting it is only an illusion. If we understood enough, if we stood where God stands,

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we would see that what looks like evil to us is in fact an unbroken chain of goodness working itself out for our greater happiness. I'm sure that friends, preachers, family members told my grieving parents that now we see through a glass darkly. God moves in mysterious ways. God wanted another little angel in heaven. The hollowness of these assurances is as clear to the despairing friends who say them as it is to the grief-stricken souls who, hearing them, have to choke back the bitter retorts that rise naturally to their lips.

Though these sad, inadequate consolations invite the grief-stricken, practically prod them, to curse God and die, I have heard these consolations—not believing them, trying to believe them—pass from my own mouth at funerals. What else can you say? Friends, grandparents, ministers might be able to shrug helplessly and say, "Though it makes no sense to us, in time God's plan will become clear," but my parents could not. They had to make sense of Andrea's death *now*, even if it meant taking on themselves the harsh, Old Testament judgment of a god who loved them enough to correct them in their idolatry. The understanding they arrived at may have meant a lifetime of sorrow—and it did—but at least it wasn't nihilism.

The last time my wife and I visited Griffin, Georgia, my Aunt Bess asked if we wanted to go to the cemetery with her. Because I hadn't been back to my mother's grave since her funeral nearly twenty years earlier, Bess was a little hesitant in asking. I don't like visiting graves—partly out of laziness, I suppose, but mostly out of spiritual ineptitude. What do you *do* at the graveside? I don't believe my prayers, however strong to however powerful a god, will affect her soul now. But I do have a profound sense that my mother is not there beneath her headstone—not there, not there.

Bess is of another mind and another generation, and she's a florist, too, which gives her firm convictions about how the dead should be commemorated.

Bess wanted me to go to the cemetery with her because, well, because that's what you do. Because that's how you show love, respect, gratitude to the dead. Because it's a family obligation. Because Mom would have wanted me to go. I went because Bess wanted me to, and in her Oldsmobile Cutlass the three of us drove through downtown Griffin, past the huge Dundee textile

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mills, and out to the cemetery, which overlooks the parking lot of a Circle K discount store. During Mom's funeral, I had stood at the grave, looked down the hill, and watched a little girl who insisted on riding her new red Big Wheel from the front door of the store to the car. There, she had to be pulled off the toy, shaken, and yelled at before she'd agree to let it be locked away from her in the trunk for the ride home. The mind is a symbol-making machine. I watched with such eerie, dissociated intensity that I remember those shoppers and their now worn-out and discarded purchases more clearly than anything else that happened that day.

I carried Bess's flower arrangement to my Uncle Buddy's grave and pushed it snug against his headstone. Erin and I stepped back in awkward respect while Bess paused for a silent moment, staring at the stone; then we all walked over to Mom's grave. On one side of it, a green stretch of clipped grass waits to be broken for my father, and on the other side is a very small grave that I had only vaguely noticed during Mom's funeral. The stone read:

ANDREA RODGERS HUDGINS
APRIL 6, 1948 – _____, 1950

I scrawled the inscription on the back of my left hand with a ballpoint pen. But because I was embarrassed and didn't want Bess to see what I was doing—taking notes like a reporter at my sister's grave—in my haste I blurred the second date. Still, I knew Andrea had to have died in the last week of the year, the week between Christmas and New Year's, so I could calculate what I wanted to know: how old Andrea was when she died. Two years, nine months.

Only while writing this essay—in fact, only when I was nearly finished with it—did I realize I was there at the accident that killed Andrea. I was born April 22, 1951, two months premature. My mother had to have been three months pregnant with me when Andrea died.

I look again at the photograph of Andrea and our happy parents, and suddenly I notice the bouncy ball her right hand is resting on possessively. Didn't it become my ball? Don't I dimly recognize it as one of the toys I played with?

My boyish wish for something in my life to be like something in

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the books I loved has been answered with a poignant and distressing richness that overwhelms me. I can't leap the gap between Andrea and me. I've tried, and failed, to imagine what her life would have been like if she had lived it. And even less can I imagine what my life would have been like if Andrea had not died and we had been raised together by those happy people in the photograph. My imagination simply isn't up to the work I'm asking it to do. For me, because my parents never talked about her, never made her a living word but left her a brooded-over silence, Andrea remains an imaginary playmate that I cannot imagine, a literary construct that I cannot construct.

If to them she was the secret daughter, to me she is the secret sister; and try as I might, I cannot entice her to crawl, toddle, step out of the shadows of their silence. I sometimes feel that my parents, in their desire to protect my brothers and me from the trauma of having a dead sister, have let Andrea die in a new and different way. By not talking about her, they have slowly deprived her—and me—of what little life she did live. And now that my mother is dead, Andrea's thirty-three months live only in my father's mind. This way of thinking is uncharitable, but it is, I'm sure, exactly the reason that Grandmomma took Roger and me aside and told us we had a sister. She wanted us to know about Andrea so we could, in memory, preserve something of her against forgetting. Unlike my parents, Grandmomma did not much care what the task might cost us. And rightly so, I think. Rightly so.

One of the trials of Job is that his children die. While his seven sons and three daughters are eating and drinking at the eldest son's house, a whirlwind sweeps in from the desert, strikes the house, and collapses it, killing all of Job's children at once. But because of Job's faith, the seven sons and three daughters are, at the end of the book, replaced with seven unnamed sons and three named daughters—Dove, Cinnamon, and Eyeshadow. There were no women in the world, the Bible tells us, more beautiful than Job's new daughters. Like Job, my parents got a family back. Within five months of her death, Andrea Rodgers Hudgins was replaced with Andrew, and twenty months after Andrew, Roger was born—followed by Michael and, much later, Timothy. But even if one of us had been a girl, there could not ever be, outside the world of books, another Andrea. No Dove, Cinnamon,

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Eyeshadow. No restoration that would remove the grief and sorrow as if it had never been.

For all my failure to bring her to life in my imagination, Andrea is at the core of Andrew's life. Late one night, in the moment I have come to think of, perhaps melodramatically, as the moment that killed my first marriage, my wife asked me if I was happy. Without thinking, I said, "Happy? I don't believe in happy. I believe in duty." She looked at me with something like horror on her face, and began, dispiritedly, to argue. Though I knew then and know now that life is more complex than that, I wouldn't budge from my fatuous assertion. What I had blurted out was a bone-deep understanding of my life that I had absorbed from my parents. Not from what they said so much as how they lived every breath they breathed and measured every step they took, putting one foot carefully in front of the other. Good soldiers, still marching. In the moment of saying it, I understood, to my shock, that I believed it, and at the same time I saw I could no longer believe it, which made me, for a while, cling to it that more closely. As my parents knew, in a world of unredeemable loss, it has its virtues.

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LIZA KLEINMAN

What Went Wrong

Childhood, as I remember it, is a tangle of shifting allegiances. It is a series of passionate friendships, each as heavy as the last with the promise of immortality. It is, in short, a long, low ramp into adulthood.

When I was ten, my best friend was Jenny Pintoff. We spent most of our time together huddled in my room, enacting television shows we'd seen, inventing dances, practicing imitations of our classmates. The fact was, my mother frowned on my going over to Jenny's house.

"Her mother has enough trouble, raising a child herself. I don't like to impose upon her," she said. Bobbie was the only divorced woman I knew, and the impression I got from my mother was that divorce was a sort of disease, pitiable, avoidable, and possibly contagious. When I talked about Bobbie at home, my mother's mouth tightened and she shook her head.

"Poor woman," she said. "Poor Jenny, growing up without a father."

Jenny did, in fact, have a father, whom she saw on occasion. He took Jenny to a lot of movies and on trips to the aquarium.

"I'm telling you," Jenny would say Monday mornings at school, "if I see that ninety-year-old turtle one more time, I'm going to vomit in a really big way."

Jenny and I were in the same class, prisoners of Mrs. Danahy, a sweet, fading woman who had taught second grade for years before getting switched to a fifth-grade classroom. Mrs. Danahy had never quite made the adjustment. Unlike the other two fifth grade classes, which sat in rows, we had our desks clumped into groups like the little kids did.

"Teamwork," Mrs. Danahy announced with regularity, "is something you can't learn too early." Jenny and I had known each other slightly for years, the way everyone did in our small suburban town. We had never paid much attention to each other

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until we were placed at adjoining desks in Mrs. Danahy's class. United in hardship, we quickly formed an alliance, rolling our eyes at each other when Mrs. Danahy announced story time, feigning gagging whenever she called a student "honey."

"I'm very mature for my age," Jenny explained to me the first time she came to my house. We were applying makeup to a life-size plastic Barbie head she'd brought over. "So my mother really relies on me. I always tell her what to wear if she has a date or something." Jenny let the information drop casually, as if everyone's parents dated. I selected blue eye shadow and played it cool.

"She asks you what to wear?" My own mother picked my clothing out from Kid-Go-Round.

"Sure—clothes, makeup. You know." Jenny watched me smear color over Barbie's plastic eyelids. "Let me show you how to do that," she said. She took the brush from my hand and swept it in quick, upward strokes.

"I think she still wants to get back with my dad, though," Jenny continued. "She went out with this really nice guy—good-looking, too, and she messed it all up by talking about my dad the whole time." Jenny paused, anticipated my next question.

"She always tells me about her dates the next day. Except if the guy's still there—then I have to wait for him to leave."

"Still there?" I said. Jenny put the eye shadow brush down and surveyed her work.

"You know," she said.

My mother knocked on my door, which was open, and peered into the room.

"How are you girls?" she asked. "Jenny? Nina? There's cookies downstairs if you want them." We thanked her and waited until she left.

"I can tell you can't talk about stuff with your mother," Jenny told me. "I don't know what my mother would do without me. We really have an amazing relationship."

Later that evening, after Jenny had gone home, my mother stopped by my room to hand me some clean laundry. She glanced at the bright-lipped, sultry-eyed Barbie that Jenny had left behind, and I saw her mouth pinch.

"You've been talking a lot about this Jenny," my mother said.

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"What about other girls? Don't you want to invite other friends over?"

"What's wrong with Jenny?" I asked. She and I had already begun laying plans for a sleepover sometime soon, and I didn't like the sound of this conversation.

"Nothing," my mother said. "Nothing's wrong with Jenny. I just think you might spend more time with people who are more . . . similar to you. That's all. How about Evelyn What's-her-name? Whose father rides the train to work with Dad? What's wrong with her?"

Evelyn Polinsky was famous throughout the fifth grade for carrying a stuffed cat around in her book bag, who she claimed talked to her. No one else would.

"Mom," I said. "Evelyn makes me want to vomit in a really big way." My mother's eyes narrowed.

"I don't want to hear that kind of language coming out of your mouth," she told me. She paused.

"I saw that mother of Jenny's, that Bobbie, in the supermarket. You know what she was buying?"

I shook my head.

"Two cartons of cigarettes, a single box of macaroni and cheese, and an issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. That was her shopping." My mother raised her eyebrows and allowed her point to settle.

"You should give that Evelyn a call," she said.

That next weekend, Jenny telephoned me.

"Listen," she said into the phone. "It's my weekend with my father, and he's taking me to the zoo. He said I could bring a friend—you want to come?"

If my own parents had offered to take me to the zoo, I would have bristled and told them I wasn't a baby.

"Yes," I said. "Let me ask my parents if I can go." I put the receiver down on the kitchen table and ran outside. My mother was on her knees shoveling holes in the dirt in front of the shrubs. A line of potted impatiens stood ready for planting.

"Mom, Jenny's father is taking her to the Bronx Zoo. Can I go?" I hopped from foot to foot, worried Jenny would hang up and leave without me.

My mother looked up from her flowers and studied me. She brushed a string of hair from her eyes with the back of her arm.

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She placed her hands, covered in thick, dirty gardening gloves, on her hips.

"Who's this father?"

"*Jenny's* father. He lives in Queens. He comes and takes her places on weekends."

"Nina, why don't you stay here and help me with the gardening? I could really use some help here. Jenny probably wants to spend some time alone with her father, if she doesn't get to see him much. Why don't you spend some time with your father today?" We both knew that my father planned to spend the day watching televised football, whether or not I was in the room with him.

"Mom," I said, "Jenny's on the phone waiting."

My mother shook her head and picked up her trowel.

"All right," she said. "Go. I want you home for dinner."

Jenny and her father arrived half an hour later to pick me up. I sat waiting on our front stoop, and when a small red car with rust spots pulled up, Jenny waved out the back window. I ran to the car and climbed in the back next to her. A bald man with a dark mustache sat with his left hand on the steering wheel, his right draped over the shoulder of a young woman in the passenger seat. The woman wore a pink sweatshirt and she had long red hair.

"Dad, this is Nina. Nina, this is my Dad and Gloria."

"Hello, Nina," Jenny's father said. "I'm Anthony." Gloria turned around and nodded at me, then looked back through the front window. She was chewing a piece of gum, and I hoped she'd offer me one.

My mother eased herself up from her yard work and crossed our small lawn to the curb.

"I thought she wasn't going to let me go, at first," I whispered to Jenny, and we gripped each other's shoulders, grinning. My mother peered inside the car.

"Hello," Anthony called. "Don't worry about a thing. We're going to have a great time. Right, girls?" He looked back at us, then ran his fingers up through Gloria's hair. Gloria sighed and shifted in the passenger seat. My mother looked at her, then at me.

"Be careful, Nina," she warned. "Don't get separated." I saw her

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face fold in embarrassment—separated, like divorced—and as she worked her mouth to make amends, we pulled away.

There are two things I remember about the rest of that day: one is that Anthony's friend Gloria didn't talk to Jenny and me at all except to tell us not to buy bras before we needed them. The other is that Jenny and I rode an elephant. It was Anthony who got excited about it when we walked past the ride.

"Look, girls! Have you ever ridden an elephant before? There's something to tell your classmates about."

A rumpled, tuskless elephant stood sleepily inside two low walls that formed a ring. The elephant wore an elaborately harnessed box with two seats, one in back of the other. An attendant in a zoo T-shirt stood outside the ring next to the elephant, holding a lead. The attendant glanced at Gloria, then at Jenny and me.

"You girls coming aboard?" he asked.

"Go on," Anthony said, reaching for his wallet. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, here."

Jenny and I looked at each other. We both knew we were a little too old for elephant rides—it was the sort of thing Evelyn Polinsky and her stuffed cat would do and then tell the whole world about. Still, we wanted to ride on that elephant.

"Fine," Jenny said to her father. "We're only doing this to make you happy."

"I'm such a tyrant," Anthony said. "How do you stand it?" Jenny and I laughed, but Anthony was looking at Gloria, who stood with her arms folded over her chest. She glanced at the elephant attendant, then off toward the parking lot. She smiled briefly at Anthony without looking at him.

"Let's go," Jenny told me. Anthony handed a few bills to the attendant, who motioned Jenny and me to a set of steps outside the ring. He led the elephant over to the steps and we climbed into the box on the elephant's back. I took the front seat and Jenny sat behind me. The attendant walked the elephant in a slow circle.

The ride was bumpy in a slow-shifting way. We sat high off the ground, but not as high as I'd hoped. It felt more like riding in a box than actually riding on an elephant. Jenny leaned in from behind me.

"I can't believe this."

"I know," I said. "We're totally crazy. We're riding an *elephant*."

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"No," she said. "Look."

Outside the ring, Anthony and Gloria were kissing. The pink sleeve of her sweatshirt bunched where Anthony gripped it, and I wondered if she still had her gum in her mouth.

"You can bet I'm not telling my mother about *this*," Jenny said. "She's just better off not knowing." I turned away from Anthony and Gloria and tried to concentrate on the elephant ride. I tried to pretend that Jenny and I were on safari in deepest Africa, with wet leaves brushing at our faces and danger lurking around every corner.

After that day, Jenny came to my house regularly. Although I could tell my mother still felt wary, she was nice enough to Jenny. I knew that this was because she preferred, if I had to play with Jenny, that we do it where she could keep an eye on us, monitor any bad influence Jenny might drag in from her broken home. The times we spent at Jenny's house—times my mother relented, or couldn't think quickly enough of a reason to prevent it—were infrequent, and I lived for them. Bobbie let us go through her closet, and Jenny and I figured out new ways for her to assemble her clothing. My mother's closet was carefully arranged: skirts here, blouses here, slacks on this side, shoes lined up neatly below. Bobbie's clothes tumbled willy-nilly against each other, slippery tops, clingy pants that started out tight down to the knees, then swirled out over thick-heeled boots. While my mother wore small, well-behaved prints, or unobtrusive solids, Bobbie favored bright clothing. She owned a yellow and green paisley blouse, a short electric blue skirt, a long pink scarf punctuated with red swirls. We went through her makeup and tried on false eyelashes, painted thick black streaks of liner onto our lids. We sprayed her deodorant like it was cologne, imagining we were dressing up for an evening out.

One day in late spring, the last day, as it turned out, of our friendship, Jenny and I were at her house digging through Bobbie's record collection. Our favorite record was "Girl from Ipanema," and Jenny slipped it onto the turntable. I played the man singer, mouthing the Portuguese part as nearly as possible, and Jenny played the woman, who resang the words in English. The standing rule was that whoever played the woman got to dance. That day, Jenny swiveled her hips and pumped her arms

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forward and back, palms toward the floor. She rolled her neck and smiled at the ceiling as if it were the hot Brazilian sun on her face. She placed her hands on her waist, fingers tilted inward, and swayed like a palm.

Bobbie was rarely home when I was over—she sold costume jewelry at a local department store and worked erratic hours. Today, though, on a cold May afternoon that felt more like March, she had off, and when she passed through the living room she started dancing, too. She held an unlit cigarette between her lips and moved like Jenny, only there was more of her to move. She nodded her head so that her dark hair swung over her arms. She wriggled her shoulders back, one at a time and then together. *Tall and tan and young and lovely*, she sang along. She grazed her fingertips up the side of her body to indicate tall and lovely. *The girl from Ipanema goes walking.* Bobbie deliberately placed one foot in front of the other, hands on her ticking hips. She swiveled past the tweeded couch, around the coffee table. *How can he tell her he loves her?* Bobbie's face tilted upward in a show of haughty indifference. I watched her move, and then that wasn't enough. I wanted to dance, too, alongside her, but I feared I'd look clumsy and ruin the song. When she stopped, Jenny and I begged her to keep at it.

"Come on, Mom. Just once more," Jenny said. Bobbie refused.

"Nope," she said. "I'm old news. I'm yesterday's headlines. You girls have to carry on without me."

Bobbie left the room, and Jenny picked up the needle and placed it at the beginning of the record. We tried to imitate Bobbie, running our hands over our sides and shimmying our shoulders, but the game had gone hollow. Jenny flipped the record player's off switch.

"Let's get something to eat," she said. I agreed. Bobbie kept an assortment of chips and snack cakes to which Jenny had unregulated access.

Their kitchen table was orange, with a white Formica top, and brown tiles lined the floor. Stacks of papers covered most of the table—unopened mail, old drawings of Jenny's, newspapers gone brittle. The uncovered surface included a sticky patch where orange juice had been left to dry. A calendar from the previous year hung above the stove, open to a drawing of two kittens working string. The kittens had enormous green eyes and worried expressions. I knew my mother would never allow such a picture

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in her own kitchen, which shone clean after dinner every night. Our kitchen had three framed prints of flowers with the English and Latin names beneath each one.

Bobbie sat at the table, her eyes dull. She held the telephone receiver in her hand, resting it on a stack of papers. She didn't look like the same person who had been dancing with us. Her shoulders hunched and her hair spilled over the tabletop. A coffee maker steamed on the counter behind her, and she curled her other hand around a mug.

"Mom," Jenny said, "we're hungry."

"Eat, then," Bobbie told her. She regarded the phone receiver in her hand, then moved to hang it up.

"Do you girls want some coffee?" she asked.

"Sure," Jenny said quickly. She rooted through a cabinet for two mugs, and poured from the pot.

"You should put some sugar in that," Bobbie instructed. Jenny spooned sugar in our drinks, and splashed each one with milk. We sat at the table and placed our mugs on top of the papers. I sniffed at the steam. Jenny picked her mug up and blew on it. She sipped from it, and her mouth stretched to a grimace, regained control.

"Good coffee, Mom," she said. She looked at me, and I bent my mouth to the rim of my drink. I slurped faintly and swallowed. Even sugared, the coffee was thick and bitter.

"I think I'll wait for it to cool a little," I said.

"So how's it going, Mom?" Jenny asked. She kept a hand on her mug and crossed her legs.

"Let me give you girls a word of advice," Bobbie said. She looked grimly at the phone on the wall. "Never date. Never marry. If you have to have sex, do it with someone you don't give a shit about, or else you're asking for disaster."

Jenny laughed loudly.

"Men," she said. "What can you do with them?" She looked at me across the table. I concentrated on picking at my mug. There was a patch of rough ceramic beneath the handle. When I looked up, Jenny was still watching me.

"Nothing, I guess," I said.

"You can say that again," Bobbie said, and again Jenny laughed. She took another sip from her coffee.

The phone rang, and Bobbie leapt to pick it up. Her voice went immediately sharp.

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"Anthony," she said. "I've been trying to call you." She stood up and moved into the living room, stretching the phone cord as far as it would go.

"I wonder what my father wants," Jenny whispered to me. "I don't think he gets me this weekend." Bobbie's voice carried into the kitchen.

"Where the hell were you last night? Where were you just now?" she said. "I called you ten times." There was a pause.

"What do you want to do?" I asked Jenny. I was thinking we could make her Barbies get ready for dates. Jenny held up a hand.

"We have to listen," she said. "This could be important."

"Ten times!" her mother said again. "Where the hell were you? Who were you with?" Another pause.

"Goddamn it, *I* have a right to know!" she yelled. "Ten times! Ten times!" I had an image of Bobbie appearing on one of the educational shows I watched when I was a little kid, doing a segment on counting. "Ten times!" she would yell, and Jenny would appear in a leotard and spangled top hat to count the telephone rings.

Across the table from me, Jenny shook her head.

"She's really pissed," she told me. "She's been asking me if he has a girlfriend, and finally I had to tell her she should ask him herself."

"Yes, I do have a right to know!" Bobbie screamed. Jenny listened with interest.

"It doesn't matter!" Bobbie shouted. "I still have a right to know! I still have a right! I still have a right!" She paused again, and we heard the flinty sound of her lighter. The air grew sharp.

"She's not supposed to do that," Jenny said, shaking her head. She coughed loudly, so Bobbie could hear.

"Cough," she said to me "She needs to know she's polluting our air, too."

"I don't want to," I said. I dipped a finger in the lukewarm coffee in front of me and swirled it.

"Just cough with me," Jenny told me. "It's okay. We won't get in trouble." She hacked dramatically.

"Shut up, Jenny," Bobbie yelled from the living room, then, "I'll say whatever the hell I want to her. What right do you have? You asshole. You fucking fucking fucking asshole. Who were you with? Who were you with? She's not going anywhere until you tell me who you were with!" We heard her fist slam the table.

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"I think I have to go now," I told Jenny.

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's early."

"The hell you are!" Bobbie screamed in the living room. Her voice was high, hysterical. "The hell you're going anywhere near her. You have no right! You have no right! I don't give a shit about that. You can't see her today. Anthony! Anthony!" We heard the phone slam down with such force the air rang. Jenny and I looked across the table at each other. Bobbie stormed into the kitchen.

"He's coming," she told Jenny. "Get up. He's coming right away." Bobbie's face was blotched and her eyes were bright with anger.

"What should I wear?" Jenny asked.

"Wear the nightgown that looks like a dress," Bobbie said. "No. No. You're not going anywhere. Get upstairs." Jenny got up from the table. I started to follow her.

"Hurry!" Bobbie said. "Jenny, you're my good girl. You're my best friend."

"Mom, wash your face," Jenny said. "Your mascara smeared." She headed for the stairs.

"Hurry and get up there," Bobbie said. "Don't you dare come down while he's here." She scrubbed under her eyes with an index finger.

"Nina!" I turned around. "You stay down here. No, go upstairs with Jenny. No, stay down here. I need you down here."

Jenny lingered in the room.

"I need to go home soon," I said. "We're going to be having dinner at my house."

"Here's what I need you to do," she said. "I need . . . I need . . ." Bobbie breathed hard. She cast frantically around the kitchen as if she were missing something.

"I'll go play with Jenny," I said.

"No," Bobbie said. "This is what we're going to do. We're going to tell your father you're dead, Jenny. We're going to teach him a lesson."

"He's not going to believe that," Jenny said. I could tell she liked the idea.

"Yes," Bobbie said, speaking more quickly. "He'll have to. He's not seeing you. We're going to tell him you're dead, to teach the fucker a lesson. Get upstairs. Do not come downstairs, Jenny. I'm telling him you're dead."

Jenny climbed up the stairs. I turned to follow.

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"No!" Bobbie shouted at me. "Jenny's right—he's not going to believe me. You're going to have to tell him. He's not going to believe me." Bobbie looked closely at me.

"Can you pretend to cry?" she asked. I shrugged.

"I don't want to," I said.

"Nina," Jenny shouted from the staircase. "It's an emergency!"

"I said get UP there!" Bobbie screamed. "Jesus Christ, he's coming. He's on his way. Nina. When he gets here, you're going to be crying, okay? And I'll be, too, I'll be saying, 'Oh, my god, oh, my god,' and you say like this, you say, 'Jenny's . . . dead!' Can you say it like that, like you can barely say it?"

Bobbie peered into my face. Her mouth opened slightly, ready to form around the words as I spoke them.

"Say it," she said. "Jenny's . . . dead. God. I can barely even say it." Her voice lurched like a record skipping.

"Teach him," she said. "Teach him. Jenny's dead. Jenny's dead. Say it."

"Jenny's dead," I whispered.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. Now say it like you're crying, like you mean it. He's got to believe this."

"No," I said. "I want to go home."

The doorbell rang.

"My god!" she cried. She reached to tuck her hair behind her ear, then stopped herself. She rubbed a finger over her eyes to further smudge her makeup. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm COMING!" she yelled at it. She turned to me and gave me a small, tight smile. She placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Nina," she said. "You're saving our lives." She turned to the door and opened it.

"Anthony!" she said. She turned from the door and looked at me, blackened tears rolling down her face. Anthony wore blue jeans and a brown leather jacket. He nodded at me, then looked past me into the room.

"Where is she?" he asked Bobbie. "I left the car running."

Bobbie looked at me. Her eyes were bright, and her mouth curled into a strange half-smile. Her fists were clenched and she trembled.

"Jenny . . ." she said to me. "Nina. Oh, god. Oh, god. Tell him, Nina. I can't say it. I can't even say it."

"What?" Jenny's father said. He fixed a look on Bobbie. "What's

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going on, here? Where is she?" He looked at me, then toward the stairs.

"Don't play any games with me, Bobbie," he said. "Jenny! We're going! Jenny!"

Bobbie stepped in front of Anthony so he couldn't walk toward the staircase. "You can't see her!" she yelled. "You can never see her! Tell him why, Nina. Tell him why. Tell him why."

Anthony leaned down and put a hand on my shoulder. He seemed suddenly relaxed.

"Nina?" he said. "Will you please go and tell Jenny that her father is here to take her to dinner? You too, if you want. Do you like pizza?"

"She can't she can't she can't!" Bobbie said, her voice so high it was barely audible. "Nina, tell him why she can't. Nina, tell him."

"No," I mouthed. Sound wouldn't come.

Bobbie's eyes widened, lines radiating from their corners and across her forehead.

"Tell him! Tell him!"

"What?" Anthony folded his arms over his chest. The leather of his jacket creaked.

"Tell him!" Bobbie said. "Nina, tell him now." She brought her fingertips to her lips and steadied them with pressure. She gave a tiny cry that may have derived from laughter, might have been a sob. I looked toward the door. Anthony leaned in toward me.

"Help me out, here," he said.

"Jenny's dead," I whispered.

"It's true!" Bobbie shrieked. "She's dead she's dead she's dead and you can't see her! You can't take her from here!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I'd never heard a man's voice like that, sharp and thick, both at once. Suddenly I was frightened, not just a little bit but deeply, achingly. I ran to the couch and curled into the corner. I buried my face in the space between the green tweeded seat cushion and the back of the sofa. It smelled of cigarette smoke and of something murky, like abandoned fruit. I could see grit on the base, where the cushion had slipped out of place. I closed my eyes.

"Jenny!" I heard Anthony running for the stairs, I heard Bobbie trying to stop him.

"No!" she screamed. "No!"

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"Jenny!" Anthony yelled. I heard his feet pound up the stairs; I heard Bobbie go after him. I could barely breathe in my position on the couch. I lifted my head out and stood up in the empty room. There was scuffling overhead and angry voices. Then there were quick, light footsteps on the staircase, and Jenny ran into the room. We could hear her parents' voices upstairs.

"He found me," Jenny reported, breathless. "She's so mad she's going to kill him."

"I have to leave," I told Jenny. I firmed my voice. "I have to go now, no matter what. It's time for me to go home. Your father has to take me."

Anthony came down the stairs into the living room, followed by Bobbie. Anthony's face was grim, white. He looked only at Jenny.

"Get your coat," he told her. "We're going."

"Stay here," Bobbie said. She, too, was pale. The muscles in her neck jumped.

"I'm dead," Jenny said. "I can't do anything if I'm dead."

"Get your coat," Anthony said. "You've really gone too far this time, Bobbie. You have really gone too far. Get your coat, Jenny."

"I'm dead," Jenny told him. "Right, Nina? I'm dead. I can't do anything."

"We're getting out of here," Anthony said. He grabbed Jenny's arm and yanked her to the door.

"Bye, Nina," Jenny said. She allowed herself to be led outside. She shut the door behind her.

"My god," Bobbie said, looking past me. Her eyes were shadowed, her forehead drawn. She inhaled forcefully. We heard the slam of two heavy doors, and the roar of the car down the street, away.

"My god," she said again. "My god. I can't take much more of this." I stood as still as I could. I held my breath. Then her gaze shifted, landed on my face.

"Liar," she said to me. "You said you'd help." I opened my mouth and couldn't produce sound.

"You stupid little bitch liar!" she shouted. "Standing there like you had all the time in the world to say whatever the hell you felt like! You said you'd help me! You said you'd help me!"

I turned my head from side to side and tried to push words from my throat. I felt my eyes film. Bobbie watched my face for a long moment and suddenly became aware of herself. She raked

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fingers through her hair, straightened her clothes. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she said then. She pulled me to her, so that my mouth lay, still open, against the flimsy purple knit of her sweater. I breathed her hot, sharp smell: cigarettes, the sweet spray deodorant Jenny and I pretended was perfume.

"I'm so sorry," she said, pressing a palm against the back of my head.

"I understand," I said. I knew it was what Jenny would say. It was what another adult would say.

"I've had a very hard day," Bobbie said. "You're sweet to understand. I've had a regular bitch of a day."

The pressure from her hand relented and I did not step back. I could feel my breath dampening her sweater. A fervent wish ripped through me: I wanted to switch the record player back on. I wanted the past hour to peel from my memory; I wanted us to throw our heads back and dance. Bobbie trembled against me.

"Tell me about your day," I said. My mother would say that to my father when he came home from work bad-tempered. "Tell me what went wrong."

Bobbie ran a hand over my neck, pushed it through my hair.

"You're an okay kid," she told me. She closed her fingers around the hair close to my scalp and shook it gently. "It's good Jenny has a friend like you." She stepped back and I felt the coolness of halving.

"You should never know from loss," Bobbie said.

When I got home that night, I was silent throughout dinner. The next day at school Jenny and I were distant from each other, and we remained that way. I wanted to tell her that it was okay, that we could still be friends, but it wasn't true. I had seen Jenny's own mother pronounce her dead, and although I didn't have the words for it then, I knew that our real friendship, the heady love that comes of mystery, had ended. We spoke to each other at school, still, but with the polite reserve I heard in my mother's voice when she chatted with strangers. One day when we were putting away our books to go to lunch, I asked after Bobbie, and Jenny looked me square in the face.

"She's fine," she said. She lifted her hands from her sides, spread her fingers to gesture a question. "She's my mother."

The rest of that school year, I passed my time with one friend or another. Jenny took up company with Adelle Stout, a thin, pale

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girl whose father had died suddenly the previous year. Lunch times, I watched Jenny rise to the balls of her feet to whisper to Adelle, watched Adelle break into slow, uncertain laughter. Adelle's limbs swung wildly from her body; and often when she stood still, she grasped her own shoulders, keeping her arms in check. She ran awkwardly, missed every kickball rolled her way. I wondered if she spent afternoons at Jenny's house, if they played records. I tried to picture Adelle sitting at Bobbie's kitchen table sipping coffee. That summer, I began hanging around with a slightly older girl, a neighbor whom I'd known all my life but never much liked. Her mother made ice cream from scratch and encouraged us to organize a neighborhood litter patrol. When the next school year began, we parted company without regret.

There is a reason why now, years later and from the other side of the country, I recall these events. Recently I heard the song Jenny and I used to dance to, heard it by accident, sighing overhead as I shopped for towels. I was in the housewares section of a department store, rifling through sale bins. The towels I found were ugly but cheap—once they must have been brown but they'd gone over to a sick beige. "Good enough," I thought. "Serviceable." I was headed to the checkout line when the song came on: *Tall and tan and young and lovely. . . .*

As it happens, I've lately parted ways with someone I still love. Although I've been telling myself to get over it, that song, that ridiculous, dated song, allowed an old layer of sorrow within me to surface. As I took my place in line I felt a rush of memory, and I thought about Jenny, whom I hadn't seen in years. I thought about the two of us draping ourselves in Bobbie's clothes, and I thought about Bobbie herself, dancing, lips closed around a cigarette. *The girl from Ipanema goes walking . . .* This is a fact: I've never, until now, told anyone what happened at Jenny's that day. I always allowed my mother to believe I trusted her advice and dropped Jenny for more appropriate friends. If Adelle Stout or anyone else ever witnessed something similar to what I saw at Jenny's, I never knew about it. I hadn't thought about Jenny in ages until I stood in that store clutching folds of terry cloth. That song brought everything back, reminded me that when it comes to loss, we're all old pros. We've all been in training since childhood, and we are armed—such strong, terrible shields!—we are amply armed to cope.

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HAROLD FROMM

Wrestling with Heidegger

> He who is acquainted with his contingent self is less likely to confuse himself with the heroes of his thinking self. . . . Knowledge of self protects against seduction by power.
>
> —Rüdiger Safranski

Rüdiger Safranski's biographical/critical study of Martin Heidegger—*Ein Meister aus Deutschland: Heidegger und seine Zeit*—retitled by its translator Ewald Osers as *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*[1]—attempts a more balanced and less polemical treatment of its subject's involvement with National Socialism than we have seen in many of the writings about him in recent years. This Safranski is able to accomplish by directing perhaps three quarters of his attention to Heidegger's works while trying to place both the works and the man within the intellectual and political milieu of early twentieth-century Germany. In certain respects Safranski's book is as difficult as Heidegger himself, since the untangling and restatement of his major opus, *Being and Time,* is an unenviable task. Yet for a dedicated and serious reader, the travail is probably worth it, for even with the biography's frequent obscurity, the net result is a clearer picture of a curious philosophical and psychological phenomenon than we are likely to get for some time. Heidegger lends himself so readily to either rapturous or contemptuous accounts that a sympathetic treatment controlled by irony, as this one is, would appear to be right on target.

Heidegger was born in 1889 in Messkirch and went through traditional Catholic schooling, a spell with the Jesuits, and a curriculum of theology and philosophy. But the skepticism of eternal truths that would eventually lead to his major writings against Western philosophy and humanism turned him away from Catholicism by the time he reached thirty, by which time

[1] MARTIN HEIDEGGER: Beyond Good and Evil, by *Rüdiger Safranski.* Trans. by *Ewald Osers.* Harvard University Press. $35.00.

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he was married, had a son, and was deeply involved in his academic career. Not long afterwards, he began an affair with a young Hannah Arendt, with whom he retained an on and off philosophical-political-emotional relationship for the rest of his life. As a graduate student he had written on psychologism as well as Duns Scotus, studied with Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenology was at first a major influence, and later produced talks and writing on Aristotle that attracted academic admirers. But his main concern from early on was ontology, the nature of "being," the subject of all his major works and many of his classes at the University of Freiberg and elsewhere. So it seems best to begin an exposition of Heidegger at this point, though it's hard to think any summary of this corpus can achieve in several pages what Safranski can just barely pull off in four hundred.

Heidegger's personality was religious and mystical, utopian and moralistic, and—unsurprisingly—thoroughly undemocratic. He was disenchanted with nineteenth-century science and its legacy of positivism and rationalism, which, like the Frankfurt School thinkers whom he later influenced (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse), he experienced as a smothering of individual subjectivity by corporate, technological, and pop culture megastructures. At first, he thought the phenomenology of Husserl, with its focus on the way subjectivity produces a world, could be construed as an escape route from the alienated life of bureaucratic, post-Enlightenment culture. And then he raised his hopes on faith and logic. But all these methodologies quickly seemed devious masks of the temporal rather than routes to the eternal, an eternal that he gradually saw as itself an evasion of the lived experience of daily life. Even Hegel's historicism, which discovers the transcendent behind the concretions of historical events, gave him only short-lived solace. In the final analysis, it was "haecceitas," the "thisness" of lived experience, that formed the basis of all his subsequent thinking and served as precursor to his key philosophical term, "Dasein," or "being there," a term which he generally used to mean human beings plunked down in a world empty of meaning, a void, the Nothing, which acquired its significance through whatever quality of being each person could achieve. In an important lecture to his students, he tried to show how the very lectern at which he spoke was experienced as a cumulative affective embeddedness in our subjective lives, as a

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piece of "world," not as substance with objective qualities superimposed in the manner of scientific or traditional empirical philosophic analysis. The sciences, like Platonism and its legacy, de-experience things by treating existence in time as irrational and insisting that the real reality can be described in objective, supra-temporal terms. Just as his departure from Catholicism was an attempt, as Safranski puts it, to snatch life back from a false Beyond, his repudiation of Western metaphysics and science was an attempt to snatch life back from a false abstractionism that transformed the feel of living into verbal constructs pretending to represent a so-called real world. But this real world was in fact constructed from systems of thought and truth that were themselves products of history and derived their meaning and significance from human thinking, traditions, and culture, as opposed to God or "Reason." "The radical idea of historicity," Safranski remarks, "destroys any universalist claim to validity."

Being and Time, published in 1927 and never completed (but already much too long in its stupefying multiplication of psychological terms) "develops the philosophical proof that human existence, *Dasein*, has no other support than this *da*, this thereness. In a sense, [Heidegger] continues Nietzsche's work: to think the death of God and criticize the 'last humans' (Nietzsche) who make do with pitiful substitute gods and do not even permit appalled horror over the disappearance of God." Employing more neologisms than anyone could have imagined, often used in sentences of an impenetrably numinous obscurity that, perversely enough, "enhanced its aura," *Being and Time* eventually gave birth to the Sartrean existentialism and Frankfurt School cultural critique that by now have calcified into little more than another step in the evolution of Western rationalism. As Richard Rorty points out (in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*[2]), Heideggerian analysis depends on the use of metaphorical language that shakes up conventional "objective" categories while intensifying subjective experience. Metaphor leaves "truth" open to endless reformulations, encouraging a constant reconfiguration of what is experienced as reality. But once the novelty of the metaphors wears off they turn into a lingua franca of the sort that Adorno later characterized as "The Jargon of Authenticity." The attempt

[2] Cambridge University Press, 1991.

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to overturn Western rationality in favor of the concrete there-ness of the Now would seem destined to fail, since all new vital sentences necessarily end up on the trash heap of worn-out truth-systems and ultimately produce yet another alienation from so-called authentic being.

Using terms like "worlding," "thrownness," "concern," "care," "being-towards-death," "ready-to-hand," "present-at-hand," *aletheia* (unconcealment), *Being and Time* does not lend itself to a terse summary in its own often inscrutable vocabulary. Instead, it seems more profitable to generalize by saying that it presents a picture of "authentic" human existence as created by the burning off of everything adventitious that detracts from the intensest experience of one's self. This means that Heidegger is little concerned with nature, society, politics, and other people, the mass of whom he characterizes as the "They," the *mobile vulgus* (not his term) manipulated by popular culture, politics, and orthodox opinions. "Thrown" into the world at birth, each individual experiences "anxiety" about meaning and death, which drives him to connect with the "They" for solace while ignoring those "moments of being" (familiar as well from Nietzsche, Proust, and Virginia Woolf) that reveal the essence of what it feels like truly to exist, to *be* authentically in the world. "Everyone is the other, and no one is himself," writes Heidegger. Yet he does not explain how it could be possible to peel away all the layers of culture-driven adventitiousness and still have as residue an authentic self. And today, when the whole notion of a self is in disfavor, the question of authenticity becomes even more problematic. For if a thing is authentic only by reference to the inauthentic and if everything is ultimately a human construct, a social agreement, how could anything be more authentic than anything else when we are all constructed from the materials of the "They"? Where would we find a purified "self" to experience this authenticity, since all the categories of selfhood derive from "inauthentic" universalist discourse?

Intense immersion in the experience of one's own being in time enables *Dasein* to capitalize on its anxiety in order to transform the Nothing—the void of meaning in which human life takes place—into moments of transcendence. Being, as it turns out, *is* Time, and the task of thinking is to make humans sensitive to its passage, to forego reifications and hypostatizations and

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recognize that only this moment is *there*. As Safranski remarks, "There is no truth in the sense of some great unknown X that we approach in an infinite progression, to which we match our statements in an ever more appropriate and correct manner; there is only the active 'discussion' with that-which-is. . . ." One can see why Rorty found Heidegger so congenial to his pragmatism and wherefrom he derived his own now famous phrase, "the conversation of mankind." Conversation *makes* truths that serve their turn until they cease to be useful, whereupon they are replaced by new metaphorical statements.

Although he became obsessed with the Greeks and had a lot to say about Plato's cave and the philosopher-king who leads mankind out of atavistic life, these are Greeks reconstructed to serve Heidegger's own purposes. The Platonic liberator, returning to the cave after seeing the light, now has a mission "to set a new truth happening into motion for a whole community and to create a new truth relationship" and, adds Safranski, it may even take violence to bring about the new dispensation. Enter the intoxicated twentieth-century philosopher with a fascistic bent, who "intends to be the herald of a historical-political and, simultaneously, philosophical epiphany." At this juncture, Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism seems almost predetermined, and the inevitable question, to use Safranski's chapter title, "Was Heidegger a Nazi?"

Heidegger's quest for authentic being, his dissatisfaction with the disorder of the Weimar Republic, and his anti-democratic contempt for the They were fertile soil for the growth of messianic sentiments. National Socialism in general and Hitler in particular intimated a deliverance from wishy-washy democracy through the re-establishment of a potent German blood, spirit, and nation that would countervail over spiritually bankrupt American technology and grubbily calculating Russian communism. Somehow, confusing political with philosophic categories, Heidegger believed the arrival of Hitler marked a critical stage in the history of Being, capable of providing authenticity to a rudderless culture as a whole. In a most enlightening entry in the diary of Hermann Mörchen quoted by Safranski, we find a plausible explanation of Heidegger's immersion in National Socialism: "I would never have believed it, but it is not really surprising. He doesn't understand much about politics, and that

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is probably why his detestation of all mediocre halfness lets him expect great things of the party that promises to do something decisive and, above all, effectively to oppose communism. . . . That was why a dictatorship that does not shrink from draconian measures must be approved." Today's consensus is that Heidegger was politically an ignoramus, a bemused philosopher who failed to distinguish between an ideal world of thought and a real world of sordid politics that was light-years away from utopia.

In May of 1933, Heidegger joined the Nazi party and somehow became rector of Freiburg University, where he had been teaching as Husserl's successor since 1928. In both his rectorial address and a eulogy he delivered for a Nazi killed in the line of duty, Heidegger speaks about historical events in the preposterous language of *Being and Time*, treating political revolution as though it were spiritual conquest. With babe-in-the-woods fervor, he downgraded the scholarship of his academic colleagues and spurred them on to what we now regard as political correctness, the willingness to lie and misrepresent in the interests of practical goals. "For Heidegger," Safranski writes, "the Nazi revolution is the attempt to 'give birth to a star' in a godless world. That is why he pulls out all the stops of his metaphysical penny-dreadful romanticism to lend events an unsuspected profundity," addressing his audience of colleagues and their wives as "metaphysical shock troop[s]." Although for a while the Nazis were pleased with Heidegger's half-incomprehensible ravings, it was inevitable that they would soon regard him as a demented political naif. His relationship with Hannah Arendt became increasingly rocky (she did, after all, write *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), and intellectuals outside Germany, like Benedetto Croce, saw him as "stupid and servile . . . vacuous and general." His colleagues at the university regarded him as a "radical visionary gone wild" because of his inability to distinguish political from philosophical reality and his willingness to trash the very sort of serious scholarship that he himself had always produced. Only a year after assuming the rectorship, disparaged and disillusioned, recognizing too late that National Socialism was just another instance of corrosive political power, in truth not nearly radical enough, Heidegger resigns. For the rest of his life, sometimes with a wily lack of candor, he tries to distance himself from the biggest blunder he ever made.

In light of Safranski's well-documented account, Rorty's de-

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scription of Heidegger as "only accidentally a Nazi" seems plausible. Like the American academics who—much more successfully—felt flushed with power by their participation in Kennedy's Camelot, but (unlike them) poorly grounded in the everyday world of sociology, political science, and economics, Heidegger was a dupe in an extended *double entendre* that made it appear he and the Nazis were talking about the same thing. Although he did a lot of harm to fellow academics, wrote horrible letters of betrayal to the authorities, and averted his eyes from innocent people who were destroyed by the Nazi machine, although he was far from inculpable and often unendurably obnoxious, although at times he was little less than a madman, he receives a good deal of understanding from Safranski's equitable retrospective. An entire chapter is devoted to "Is Heidegger Anti-Semitic?" to which Safranski's reply is "Certainly not in the sense of the ideological lunacy of the Nazis." There are no anti-Semitic remarks in his writings or speeches, he defends Jewish professors, and he objected to ideological anti-Semitism. Still, Arendt was highly critical of his behavior, provoking an infuriated self-defense in one of the rounds of their correspondence. She was not unjustified, for Safranski notes that Heidegger did indeed distinguish between Germans and German Jews and defended (to quote Heidegger himself) "bringing genuine autochthonous forces and educators into our German spiritual life" while opposing a "growing Judaization." And he averted his eyes from the Holocaust. But on the scale of Nazi barbarism, Heidegger comes off as very small potatoes.

Heidegger's gradual disillusionment with National Socialism was of a piece with his aversion to technology, government, and bureaucratic organization as conduits away from authenticity. By the end of the thirties, he reverts to his traditional role as thinker, turning to poetry and art while shifting emphasis from *Dasein* to language, which he refers to as the house of Being. This consuming idea of Being and the "experience of Being," although never really clarified by Heidegger himself, is treated again and again by Safranski, most helpfully as "the inexhaustibility of reality" wherein "man discovers himself and his play space. He is not captured or trapped in the existent," he becomes "the place of the self-visibility of Being." Yet as Heidegger becomes more and more numinous in his overdetermined readings of poetry in

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general and Hölderlin in particular, Being takes on the aura of a godterm, gradually sounding like the very sort of substance he had been at great pains to deconstruct in earlier years as "metaphysical."

In 1945, when "denazification" proceedings were instituted by the Allies, Heidegger was raked through the coals for his Nazified appeals to the student body while rector, his dedication to "the führer principle," his political denigrations of the scholarly functions of university professors. As punishment, he was forced to resign from the university and to abstain from teaching, although eventually he was allowed to return as what we would call a visiting professor. Throughout these proceedings, Heidegger felt no guilt, his view remaining that he had believed National Socialism to be a metaphysical revolution, from which he had detached himself once its true nature became apparent, although he did admit some shame for his brief collaboration—which he attributed to delusion. But in 1966, when he was interviewed, rather tactfully, by *Der Spiegel*, he failed to allude to the worst aspects of his collaboration and made his role seem "more harmless than it was." As Safranski reminds us over again, Heidegger's worst silence about his participation in the events of the early thirties was his silence about himself, "about the philosopher's seducibility by power. He too . . . failed to ask the one question: Who am I really when I am thinking?" What Heidegger could not see (as Safranski goes on to explain in the passage I have used as epigraph above) was the contingency of his own self in time and place and the influence of that contingency on his thoughts and acts, lifting the thinker out of the realm of pure innocent thinking and implicating him in the ethos and events of his time. One of his philosophy's most influential concepts was the contingency of truth in Western metaphysics and the desirability of raising oneself out of socially constructed reality into the thisness of the moment of Being. But he was unable to apply these insights to himself as thinking subject.

The relationship between Arendt and Heidegger continued until his death in 1976, but the two thinkers remained fractious, antagonistic, distrustful, even—on her part—condemnatory, though she never ceased to adore him. For her, his "authentic self" had taken on the function of a selfish, dishonest, solipsistic god while ignoring the essentially social nature of human exis-

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tence. As she herself put it, "What, consequently, appears as 'Fall' in Heidegger are all those modes of existence which rest on the fact that Man lives together in the world with his fellows." To reject the ordinary world of the "They" is to reject everything that is human and to flirt with the fascism of the superman.

In the final analysis, Heidegger's contribution to twentieth-century philosophy was great, hammering conclusive nails into the coffin of Western metaphysics, destabilizing the imputed objectivity of rational thought, reaffirming Kierkegaard's notion that truth is subjectivity, and denigrating the modern world's instrumentality, its genius for transmuting *Dasein* into the They. But his attempt to shed light on the "experience of Being" seems to me a case of reinventing the wheel. For since the beginnings of civilization people have intuitively known the secret of intense participation in "moments of being" without the need for a psychological road map, which Heidegger doesn't supply in any case. The most powerful and richly rewarding experiences in human life are those devoid of representation, meaning, and practicality, experiences that lead to nothing but themselves and mean nothing more than the emotional force of their own intensity. Of these, the Big Three would appear to be music, sports, and sex, activities in which, so to speak, you can't tell the dancer from the dance. Once conscious reflection upon representational content enters the picture, we're back in the world of means and ends, of righteousness, aggrandizement, victory, and similar nasty things. Purest being (if you're looking for such a thing) lies in the squelching of the ratiocinative, calculating, purposeful, alienating self. Heidegger's turn toward the arts was a recognition of this, but he ought to have turned to music (for Schopenhauer a "thing in itself") rather than poetry, which is inevitably compromised by meaning, by its attempt to represent a world. Representation is goal-oriented, instrumental, not content to rest within the power of its own formalities. As truths come and go, the power of representational arts waxes and wanes as their correspondence with "reality" becomes more or less adequate, in accordance with the needs of the times. Music says, represents, nothing, and its adequacies are formal, biological, above the flux. Even programmatic music must have a life beyond its program, beholden to the hidden formalities of the body and the rhythms of the psyche rather than to the truths of the world.

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In the past few months I've been buying piles of compact disks, usually of music I've owned on LP's but often works, or at least performances, I've never heard before. The other day I acquired my fourth recording of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which I have been listening to over the course of forty-eight years, since the very first one that I bought in 1950 and which I heard almost every day, until I knew it by heart, when the *real* pleasure begins. Hearing this splendid new performance by Helmuth Rilling with his excellent singers and whiny old instruments (though it's not aggressively "authentic"), I once again experienced the ecstatic self-transcendence that this astounding masterpiece never fails to produce in me. Here was a moment of being that lasted almost three hours. But, on a lesser scale, even the opening six minute *Ricercar a tre* (done on a harpsichord) from a new recording of Bach's *Musical Offering* threw me for a loop, banishing all thoughts about getting or spending, or what I needed to do for dinner.

As for the many people for whom demanding music won't produce its magic, there's sports, of course (the aspect of winning, however, seems detrimental). The throw, the hit, the axel, the dive—the exhilarated viewer becomes one with the movement and skill, like the dancer with the dance. So if one can't cut it with Bach, there's always Michael Jordan. And when all else fails, there's sex, nowadays (with birth control and porno videos) less instrumental than ever before. And though I wouldn't put sex on the same plane as Bach, in this game of Being you've got to take what you can get.

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BRUCE BAWER

Time's Up

One evening recently I was having supper with my father at a diner on Manhattan's Upper East Side when his eye was caught by something outside the front window. "Look who it is," he said. I followed his gaze to see a short, stocky figure in a tuxedo, some distance down the sidewalk. He had just emerged from Elaine's, the famous celebrity bistro a few doors away, and was moving, very, very slowly, in our direction. We watched him as he made his way, with what seemed considerable effort, to the public phone a few feet from our table. When he lifted the receiver from its hook, he seemed to feel burdened by its weight, and when he fed a coin into the box his hand trembled.

It was Norman Mailer.

The sight of him shocked me. He looked terribly tired and feeble, and far too small ever to have been an actor in any of the aggressive, macho scenarios I had read about over the years, in his own work and elsewhere. He looked like a man who had been worn down by life and was now just dragging himself through the motions—who pulled on his tuxedo of an evening and went to Elaine's, that not-so-clean, not-so-well-lighted place, simply because there was nowhere else to go if you were Norman Mailer and had made of your life what you had made of it. And this was a man whom, perhaps more than anyone in the last half-century, one had always tended to picture in action, making a ruckus—and making noise, too, whether he actually had anything worthwhile to say or not.

He stood there talking on the phone for several minutes, only five or six feet away, his back half-turned to us; and while he did, my father and I sat there looking at him, discussing his literary career, and picking at our pot roast. I was struck by the differences between our perceptions. To my father, a man of Mailer's own generation who was there when *The Naked and the Dead* came out but who hadn't read him in years, Mailer was a great author, a

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relic of a more thrilling literary time when novels made news and literature mattered; it saddened him to see that immense personage so visibly past his prime. To me, a book critic who had read *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in college, had reviewed Peter Manso's "oral biography" of Mailer as well as both *Harlot's Ghost* and *The Gospel According to the Son*, and who saw Mailer as largely responsible for hastening the demise of the novel as a serious commodity, the man on the phone was a somewhat more problematic figure.

One point of agreement that seemed to emerge from our discussion was that Mailer was, or at least had been, our premier celebrity writer. The celebrity writer, of course, isn't a strictly twentieth-century phenomenon. Charles Dickens' American appearances drew huge crowds; the public knew Oscar Wilde as much for his quips as for his plays. Yet it wasn't till the advent of the Hollywood star factory and the modern publicity machine that literary celebrity came into its own. In the Roaring Twenties, the popular press played up Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald as the embodiments of Flaming Youth; some years later Ernest Hemingway was recast as "Papa," the novelist as sage and tough guy.

And then along came Norman Mailer, who from the beginning piggybacked his image onto that of Papa Hemingway in much the way that Allen Ginsberg (another writer who made his mark largely by throwing himself at big themes and blowing his own horn) would spend his career riding Walt Whitman's uneasy shoulders. Mailer's best-selling and critically acclaimed first book *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), which at the time was viewed as *the* American novel of World War II and which today seems thoroughly conventional (and far less readable than, say, Irwin Shaw's now-forgotten *The Young Lions*), established him as Hemingway's heir presumptive. He followed it with two forced, unfocused novels, *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955), both of which flopped. On the occasion of the latter book's publication, he sent a copy to Hemingway along with the following letter:

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

—because finally after all these years
I am deeply curious to know
what you think of this.

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> —but if you do not answer, or if you
> answer with the kind of crap you
> use to answer unprofessional writers,
> sycophants, brown-nosers, etc., then
> fuck you, and I will never attempt
> to communicate with you again.

The package came back marked *Address Unknown.* Mailer never attempted to communicate with Hemingway again.

Tumbling from grace with his second and third novels, Mailer faced a dilemma. His fiction hadn't forked any lightning; he seemed headed for the dustbin of literary history. What to do? What he did was to make a leap of faith. Leaving behind the novel for the time being, he compiled *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), a mishmash of essays, reviews, poems, missives, columns, exchanges, rants, gibes, jokes, and jeremiads (including the letter to Hemingway) that nakedly broadcast his insecurity about his manhood, his romance with the word "existential," his often comically fraught view of male-female relations, and—suffusing the whole book—a lust for celebrity so desperate that he was, quite plainly, more than willing to play the buffoon in order to attain it.

The book, by turns earnest, frivolous, and passionate, achieved just what Mailer intended it to: appearing at the very end of the 1950s, when the culture of celebrity was poised to infect the world of serious arts and letters on an epidemic scale, it placed Mailer just where he wanted to be—at center stage. If his fiction had not convinced critics that he deserved (as he claimed) the title of America's premier novelist, the shameless self-advertisement that was his 1959 book's only *raison d'être* accomplished exactly what he had intended it to. Included in *Advertisements for Myself* were Mailer's columns for the then young *Village Voice*, in the first of which he explained that he had taken on the task of churning out a weekly contribution to the paper in order "to discover in public how much of me is sheer egotism." This turned out to be a lifetime project. His subsequent nonfiction, which solidified his position in a way that few novels, by themselves, could ever have done, shows Mailer time and again parading his ego before a bored and baffled public, cozying up to big names and great events, and casting himself as the hero: in *The Armies of the Night*

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(1968) he turns an antiwar demo into an opportunity for self-display; in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968) he places himself at the center of the political-convention action; in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) he appoints himself Field Marshal in the War between Men and Women.

And now comes *The Time of Our Time*, a 1,286-page ego massage designed, we are told, to mark both the fiftieth anniversary of *The Naked and the Dead* and Mailer's seventy-fifth birthday.[1] One of the first things that will strike a reader of this tome is that the dust jacket has printed on it the words "A Signed First Edition." I've never before seen any book, except maybe a small-press poetry chapbook, that advertised on its cover the fact that it contained the author's John Hancock. This peculiarity reinforces one's impression that the book exists less because Random House considered its publication warranted by the enduring merit or importance of the author's work than because Mailer, whatever the present state of his literary reputation, remains a celebrity whose autograph, if not his writing, might conceivably still be a salable commodity.

It's thanks to his celebrity, surely, that Mailer continues to be lavishly published and to be prominently reviewed. Yet do people really read him anymore? It's hard to avoid the conclusion that they don't. Ask people who read books when they last read him and how he figures in their maps of the literary world and you will soon discern that the time of his time is no more. To be sure, there was a time—and it was, arguably, the most dramatic time in the last half-century of our nation's history—when Mailer often seemed to be at one with the times, catching the wave of the *Zeitgeist* and riding it more sensationally than just about anybody else this side of the Beatles. Despite his consistent and obnoxious use of history as a stage on which to make a spectacle of himself (even as he refused to delve too deeply into that self, refused to seek to understand exactly what it was that drove him to behave as he did), Mailer nonetheless succeeded in capturing much of the rough-and-tumble of American politics at the end of the 1960s. Yet in recent years he has made a career of churning out overblown, underedited volumes that would frankly have had difficulty finding a publisher without a famous name on the cover.

[1] THE TIME OF OUR TIME, by *Norman Mailer*. Random House. $39.50.

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There is, admittedly, something oddly impressive about the way in which *The Time of Our Time* touches so many of the bases of late twentieth-century American public life, among them the Cold War, the Kennedy assassination, the civil rights and antiwar movements, the moon landing, women's lib, and Watergate. For all its weaknesses, the book does add up to a relatively coherent subjective account of our times. To read it is to be reminded not only that Mailer has always presented himself as being out to penetrate the mystery at the heart of the American darkness, but also that for him all clues lead to the CIA, which in his view, apparently, has been responsible for just about everything noxious and noteworthy that has happened since November 22, 1963. Yet Mailer's conspiracy-mongering is that not of a stern, astringent social critic but of an aging boy who, just under the surface, plainly thinks all this skullduggery is really, really neat. In his 1991 novel *Harlot's Ghost*, he imagines himself as a dashing, womanizing CIA agent who, over the decades, crosses paths with everyone from Howard Hunt to Marilyn Monroe and is always wherever the action is. (Those few hardy souls who manage to get past its first hundred or so pages may be forgiven for reading it as an account of Mailer's fantasy life—the parallel existence he perhaps wished he had been leading during all those long dull family summers in Easthampton and Provincetown.)

Mailer's critics have often mentioned his stabbing of his second wife, Adele, and his support for the murderer Jack Henry Abbott, who after Mailer helped spring him from prison killed again. It's not unfair to bring these events up, because Mailer plainly never learned from them. Far from being isolated tragedies, as he has tried to suggest, they were the inevitable consequence of the philosophy by which he has lived his life and implicitly encouraged others to live theirs. Though he has written endlessly of souls, sex, and sin, he exhibits little regard for such values as humility, contrition, and redemption, for the need to take responsibility for one's actions and their consequences. He is drawn to the high drama of moral conflict, but not to the hard task of discerning and defending the good; he seeks to know others well enough to subdue them, but he shows virtually no interest in developing the kind of empathic understanding that is one of the qualities separating good novelists from bad. Mailer's need to create strife is, indeed, a running theme of *The Time of*

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Our Time. To him the world is an existential crucible in which provoking conflict is the only way truly to Be and Know. He doesn't fight because he's sure he's right and others are wrong, but because he believes that only through fighting—only in that existential moment of conflict, when one's heart and mind and soul and body are all on the block—can one even begin to get some sense of where right and wrong may lie.

No surprise, then, that *The Time of Our Time* opens with an anecdote—reprinted from Mailer's 1966 collection *Cannibals and Christians*—about a boxing match between Hemingway and the Canadian novelist Morley Callaghan, with F. Scott Fitzgerald as timekeeper, that created lasting tensions among the three writers and that Hemingway told in *A Moveable Feast.* Mailer revisited the tale in order to make the point that "there are two kinds of brave men: those who are brave by the grace of nature, and those who are brave by an act of will," and that Hemingway is one of the latter sort of men—deeply frightened by life, but compelled by some inner need to play the he-man with nerves of steel. By placing this brief passage at the start of this huge book, Mailer plainly seems to be implying that he, too, is brave by will alone. But is brave the right word for what Mailer is? *The Time of Our Time* abounds in passages that show him willfully flexing his muscles in gratuitous warfare with unwilling and mystified opponents. Invariably, however, he comes off looking not courageous but asinine. For example, in an excerpt from *The Armies of the Night* that recounts his participation, with other writers and intellectuals, in a 1967 antiwar protest at the Pentagon, Mailer carries out a private war against Robert Lowell. Mailer, writing of himself (as usual) in the third person, recounts their first exchange:

> "I'm just going to read some poems," he said. "I suppose you're going to speak, Norman."
>
> "Well, I will."
>
> "Yes, you're awfully good at that."
>
> "Not really." Harrumphs, modifications, protestations, and denials of the virtue of the ability to speak.
>
> "I'm no good at all at public speaking," said Lowell in the kindest voice. He had indisputably won the first round. Mailer the younger, presumptive, and self-elected prince was left to his great surprise—for he had been exercised this way many times before—with the unmistakable feeling that there was some faint strain of the second-rate in this ability to speak on your feet.

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The contest continues:

> "You know, Norman," said Lowell in his fondest voice, "Elizabeth and I really think you're the finest journalist in America."
>
> . . . "Well, Cal," said Mailer, using Lowell's nickname for the first time, "there are days when I think of myself as being the best writer in America."
>
> The effect was equal to walloping a roundhouse right into the heart of an English boxer who has been hitherto right up on his toes. . . . "Oh, Norman, oh, certainly," he said, "I didn't mean to imply, heavens no, it's just that I have such *respect* for good journalism."
>
> "Well, I don't know that I do," said Mailer. "It's much harder to write"—the next said with great and false graciousness—"a good poem."

Mailer proceeded to deliver to a large audience of fellow protesters an extemporaneous speech that reads like sixties radicalism at its most incoherent, infantile, and self-indulgent. He obviously hadn't given a moment's thought to what he might say, preferring instead to make an existential experience out of it. Then Lowell, with quiet self-assurance, and to the adoring applause of the crowd, read one of his poems—in consequence of which "Mailer discovered he was jealous. Not of the talent. Lowell's talent was very large, but then Mailer was a bulldog about the value of his own talent. No, Mailer was jealous because he had worked for this audience, and Lowell without effort seemed to have stolen them." This, naturally, meant war: "To Mailer," he writes, "it was now *mano a mano*." So Mailer retook the microphone and made an even bigger ass of himself, describing in detail a visit he had just made to the men's room. "Publicity hound!" someone shouted.

Did his horrible reception at this event (Mailer's account of which, to give him his due, remains as weirdly engaging as ever) lead him to rethink his strategies? Of course not. Years later, on a 1971 "Dick Cavett Show," he made an equally ridiculous spectacle of himself. The other guests that evening were his longtime nemesis Gore Vidal—who had recently compared Mailer in print to Charles Manson, and whose Brahmin credentials, like Lowell's, have always patently intimidated Mailer—and Vidal's friend Janet Flanner, *The New Yorker* writer. As Mailer recounts (in what is perhaps the collection's most entertaining piece), both Vidal and Flanner went on camera before Mailer and

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had a cozy, amusing chat with Cavett about Eleanor Roosevelt, whom Vidal had known personally. And Mailer? "In the Green Room, Mailer—like that general he could never become—was contemplating the military chances for entering an ambush of such delicacy connected to such strength. The only answer was attack. Shatter all prepared positions. Go out, he said to himself, and smash that fucking tea-house."

Once again Mailer made a preposterous scene and antagonized everybody. "I want to ask all of you something," he inquired at one point. "Are you all really truly idiots or is it me?" "YOU!" the audience shouted back. When asked why he was behaving like such a fool, Mailer explained that we live in a time when there are not so many great writers and "I have presumed with all my extraordinary arrogance and loutishness and crudeness to step forth and say, 'I'm going to be the champ until one of you knocks me off.' Well, fine, but, you know, they don't knock you off because they're too damned simply yellow, and they kick me in the nuts, and I don't like it." This is, manifestly, Mailer's paramount professional compulsion: his need to view himself as the champ (and, of course, to sound like Hemingway when talking about it). In our age of celebrity, this silliness has taken him a long way. Just as Ginsberg frequently upstaged better poets at group readings by taking his clothes off, so Mailer has never resisted an opportunity to turn the spotlight onto himself by bragging and blustering like a prizefighter at a weigh-in. Thus has he kept his name alive and gotten his books reviewed.

A third writer on the *Armies of the Night* platform with Mailer and Lowell was Paul Goodman, who in many ways came close to being a Mailer *Doppelgänger* except for the fact that he was gay and not at war with himself over it. Mailer sums up his position on this subject: "Onanism and homosexuality were not, to Mailer, light vices—to him it sometimes seemed that much of life and most of society were designed precisely to drive men deep into onanism and homosexuality. One defied such a fate by sweeping up the psychic profit that derived from the existential assertion of oneself—which was a way of saying that nobody was born a man: Manhood was earned provided you were good enough, bold enough." In other words, homosexuality and manhood are opposites; homosexuality results from giving into one's most dangerous urges, and manhood results from resisting those urges

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moment by moment—even, presumably, if the pressure to prove yourself compels you to act like an aggressive jerk.

Mailer goes on to deride "Goodman's damnable tolerance for all the varieties of sex. Did he know nothing of evil or entropy? Sex was the superhighway to your own soul's entropy if it was used without a constant sharpening of the taste. And orgies? What did Goodman know of orgies, real ones, not lib-lab college orgies to carry out the higher program of the Great Society, but real ones with murder in the air and witches on the shoulder?" This is the true Mailer—unable to conceive of a genuinely worthwhile sexual encounter that isn't accompanied by an overpowering sense of the presence of evil and that doesn't take one to the brink of slaughter.

There is, to be sure, something almost admirable about the way in which Mailer, despite much ridicule and the fact that he seems never to have made a single convert, has continued over the years to hold to, and to sound off unhesitatingly about, his singular—and singularly absurd—philosophy of life. *The Time of Our Time* is, among other things, a record of his steadfast adherence thereto. To read through this big doorstop of a book is to be astonished by his philosophical consistency over the last half-century—by his tireless bullying, fascination with violence, and "love of murder" (as Vidal put it on the "Cavett" show); by his perennial preoccupation with JFK and Marilyn Monroe as embodiments of ideal American manhood and womanhood, respectively; by his abiding (and, at times, almost poignant) fixation on manhood as a magical, mysterious commodity, a dream to be realized, an Everest to be scaled; by the way in which he has, throughout his career and in the face of all kinds of events that might have been expected to compel him to grow up a bit, succeeded in embodying American manhood at its most puerile and insecure; and by the fact that the most readable pieces in Mailer's personally selected "best of" volume are his accounts of his own TV appearances, interviews with people like Madonna, and so forth. That he continues to be treated as if he were a figure of importance, and that his publishers were able to be talked into issuing *The Time of Our Time*, is a reflection not of the quality of his work but of his still considerable fame—which he has won less through artistic genius than through often clownish and irresponsible self-advertisement. But then, such are the times we live in.

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MICHAEL VAN WALLEGHEN

Happiness

Weep for what little things could make them glad.
—Robert Frost, "Directive"

Melvin,

the large collie
who lives in the red house
at the end of my daily run
is happy,
happy to see me
even now,
in February—
a month of low skies
and slowly melting snow.

His yard
has turned almost
entirely to mud—
but so what?

Today,
as if to please me,
he has torn apart
and scattered
everywhere,
a yellow plastic bucket
the color of forsythia
or daffodils . . .

And now,
in a transport
of cross-eyed
muddy ecstasy,

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he has placed
his filthy two front paws
together
on the top pipe
of his sagging cyclone fence—

drooling a little,
his tail
wagging furiously,
until finally,
as if I were God's angel himself—

fulgent,
blinding,
aflame
with news of the Resurrection,
I give him a biscuit
instead.

Which is fine with Melvin—
who is wise,
by whole epochs
of evolution,
beyond his years.

Take
what you can get,
that's his motto . . .

And really,
apropos of bliss,
happiness
and the true rapture,
what saint
could tell us half as much . . . ?

even as he drops
back down
into the cold

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dogshit muck
he'll have to live in
everyday
for weeks on end perhaps
unless it freezes . . .

whining now,
dancing
nervously
as I turn away
again,
to leave him there—
the same today
as yesterday—

one of the truly wretched
of this earth
whose happiness
is almost more
than I can bear.

Coyote

I could tell
from the briskness
of her stride
and the level
steadfast focus
of her gaze
that she was on a mission
of some importance . . .

but so was I
that 4 A.M.
and towing a boat besides—
speeding on my dim,

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lost way
to some unpronounceable lake
in southern Illinois
I'd never fished before.

Otherwise,
because her numinous
and fleeting disregard
seemed almost
apparitional,
I think I might
have turned the car around
and tried to follow her
with my headlights
for a while
just to see
if she were real.

And then,
as birds start up
and formless night,
beyond
the car's black windows,
gives way
to light again,
I find the turnoff
I thought
I'd missed somehow . . .

a road
that turns past fields
of milkweed,
ruined orchards
and collapsing barns—

beside which,
constellations
of entropic
farm machinery

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rust half-visible
through their nebular fog.

And no one anywhere.
No cars.
No signs along the road.
As if
whoever lived here once
had vanished
unaccountably—

like one of those flawed
and mythic civilizations
lost
in blear antiquity,
wiped out
by plague
or put to the sword
by some barbarian army . . .

But even as the catastrophe
is upon them,
the goddess Artemis
sets off
at the speed of light
to petition Zeus,
who lives
far from here,
far from here
at the end of the universe . . .

or in the next county
where she appears,
in her dawn-gray
numinous guise,
as coyote—

and quite as real
as you

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or I—
slamming on the brakes
for wild-eyed,
well-antlered
Actaeon,
chased by dogs
and leaping out of nowhere

three feet
in front of the car.

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SARA LONDON

Cold War

That first winter
he drove us across
the frozen surface
of Lake Champlain—
from Charlotte, Vermont
to Essex, New York and back,
in our VW bus,
the youngest at home
with our mother,
who knew nothing
until late that night
when my father, lighting
his pipe, said casually,
"I did it," and she,
unbelieving at first,
didn't speak, and then
in a voice that came
darkly, like the shadow
of a closing door:
"Are you some
kind of maniac?"

Weeks later
in the Mustang,
he maneuvered off the pier
and onto the rink
of lake, past stunned
hockey players,
accelerating
to the bruised
transparency of thinner
shield, then,

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slamming his brakes,
spiraled us
into a vortex
degrees beyond our
understanding,
though the sheer
blind thrill of it
we mistook
for his happiness
wrenched free.

What failures
at violence, these
test drives, the earth's
ice sealed against
his folly,
his slow fall
not downward
but sprawling,
like fractures
in anchor ice,
or tributaries
bleeding in spring.
That February
might have been
fiction, but for the
pinging and shifting
of depths beneath us
the moment the Mustang
spun to its standstill,
a glazed world
turning through
milky oxygen,
and no sure direction
home.
The scooped
vinyl cushion
of back seat
made a dark lap

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we squirmed in,
fearing and craving
these odd outings,
high on the cloudy
chemistry of love's failure—
or so we later learned.
Clues, though,
were everywhere,
shavings of crystallized
disappointment
beading on our mother's
tepid forehead
as she lined our mittens
along the radiator's
chipped ribs
and hung
our coats.

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SYDNEY LEA

Yoked Together

The warden, cop, and vet all told me on the phone the coon
must be destroyed,
provided, like them, I possessed the means to do it, as for
better or worse I did.

He'd come up out of our woods and onto the porch and
simply would not scare.
He had stuff running out of his eyes, and skinny,
tatterdemalion hair

and he probably had, therefore, rabies. Or maybe distemper.
In any event,
surely something was wrong, and according to the doctor, my
good friend,

something abnormal enough it likely posed a not
inconsiderable health threat
to our family, our dogs, our property, and to other families
and to other pets,

and also to what he called "the wildlife community." By the
time I got done
searching for keys for the gun cabinet, he stood out there in
the winter garden,

where now and then he pawed at the wilted greens of a buried
carrot, pausing
now and then as well to lift one foot, and next the other, and
looking

more than anything bewildered. He reminded me of poor
gone Arthur,

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the idiot from one town away: he and I used to split up wood
together,

and he'd sort of do the same thing with his legs, and his eyes
were also ringed
with black. (He smoked a filthy corncob pipe, through which
everything

must pass: milkweed, leaves of grass, cigars, cigarettes, chew—
you name it.)
I suppose I thought of him because he too was above all else
bewildered.

He'd squint and scratch his head, as if he never completely
understood
—no more, really, come to think of it after all these years,
than I could—

why I'd show up at his shack every late August with the saw rig
and the maul
to help him fill his woodshed, which was no more than an
empty pony-stall.

I imagined using, precisely, a maul on this poor, disheveled,
sickly beast,
because I didn't want my small daughters to hear me fire the
shotgun blast

that would do him in. Yet I admit I was also afraid to get too
close,
and I likewise must have supposed a bludgeoning would make
an awful mess,

and somehow it might have felt too much as though I'd
brought a heavy blade
down on baffled Arthur, the coon's human image, as I've
already said.

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The shotgun having been fired, the creature fell and huffed
once. Then: silence.
And I, no more than a dreary man of letters, as if my knee
had jerked,

thought of myself at one end and Arthur at the other of a
cropped white birch,
and of a famous poet's phrase about things being "yoked
together by violence."

Ballad

Near the art gallery basement, with its dark studios,
the building ensorceled by thick ivy vines;
near the gray granite mansion, august and ridiculous,

housing the spooks' club they called Skull and Bones;
X came down High Street one way, just as I
swaggered to meet him, headed the other;

I imagined *High Noon*, melodramatically
(and myself some young Ivy League Gary Cooper).
Trouble loomed close, though what X had done

beforehand to turn me mysteriously mean
I've entirely forgotten. And now X is gone:
so notes the new issue of *Yale* magazine.

I figured that I was his equal, at least,
so felt more adrenalized than afraid,
and near disembodied on the quietened back street.

Yet I did mean to cave in the s.o.b.'s head.
No, not really—because this was just middle class

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confrontation: no weapons, no mayhem nor murder.

We knew that such violence as might come to pass
relied (early sixties) on a prevalent order,
on rules and assumptions to which each was bound.

Life always surprises. I threw a wild right,
X blocked it and swung: I went heavily down.
He was lucky: hell, *he* didn't know how to fight,

anymore than I did; we were training as "leaders,"
though now I think too I was training to love
and to register breaks in the order, odd wonders:

the white constellations wheeling above
seemed spirits observing my brief minor pain;
and X's expression was gratified, yes,

yet also, by starlight and gaslight, benign.
So it seemed hard to tell who had won and who lost.
Both of our futures appeared well assured.

We shook hands, then we parted, like ghosts or like lovers,
slow-moving and sated, not breathing a word,
but now and then peering back over our shoulders,

as if what had happened held something worth saving. . . .
which it must have. What was it? I couldn't have said,
though it strangely involved a spiritual seeing,

which lingers—or does it?—now that poor X is dead.

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JOHN RIDLAND

My London Muse

My Autumn Muse in London stood,
  Tall and black and old and blind,
Her bearing straight, her clothing good:
  "Would anybody be so kind?—
Please?—Is there anybody by?
  Can you help me write this air letter?"
I waited for some London guy
  Or lady who could do it better—
The Post Office was packed with writers
  Standing in line to buy a stamp,
But none of all those candlelighters
  Spotted her by her dusky lamp,
So I spoke up. "Maybe I can."
  Out of the way she led me to
The window counter, and began
  Dictating. "There are only two,"
She said without apologizing—
  How could a Muse apologize!
The words flowed free without revising—
  No Muse's business to revise.
"To 'Dear George'—Dr. G.V. Swift—
  'I hope your family all thrive.
Thanks for your telegram and gift.
  Did my last letter not arrive?
Early this week I had to spend
  The evening with my pious friend'—
Underline *pious*—'and attend
  Communion with him in the end.
We ate our supper then together—
  I was proper enough to cope.
We have been fortunate in our weather,
  Still mild, and we are full of hope'—

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Underline *full*—'that it will hold.
  Last winter, as you will remember,
We nearly perished with the cold.
  We shall know better come December.' "
The second message overlapped
  The other only at one edge.
" 'Dear Gloria,' " her finger tapped
  My arm—a Muse's privilege—
" 'I hope your birthday party went
  On well.'—It was her fiftieth—
'And what about the trays I sent
  For Mr. Fahide and Miss Smith?
I hear that Cynthia'—her daughter—
  'Has gone to Manchester alone.
I hope that she will be all right there
  And do well, wholly on her own.
I hope that we will be together
  In England soon. I bless your name.
We have been fortunate in our weather . . . ' "
  The rest came about the same.
Then the addresses spelled with care,
  " 'Freetown' full stop. 'Sierra Leone.'
Be sure to add 'West Africa,'
  Some postal workers have not known
Where Sierra Leone is, you know?"
  I had my own uncertainty
But nodded twice as if to show,
  I know—although she wouldn't see.
"Now read them, please." I read through each
  Distinctly to her judging ear,
Returning her her counter-speech,
  " ' . . . A very prosperous New Year.' "
She smiled, "Thank you," and reached both hands—
  Cool, dry and steady—"You have done
A good deed." (When a muse commands
  Who could refuse?) "I know someone
In California,"—I was a visitor
  From California, mailing a letter—
"Delores Johnson in Buena Vista."

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I was sorry, I hadn't met her.
"Have a good trip to Sierra Leone—
To California, I mean,"
She laughed, and turned to stand in line
But not before I'd caught her clean
Unscented breath and glimpsed, behind
The darkened lenses, blank and keen,
Archaic, half-inhuman, blind,
Her eyes which glittered laurel-green.

Sapphic Ode in Collins Food Court

Classic features, Grecian—*Sapphic*, call them—
Modeled fresh from light Australian frankness,
Careless hairs in stringy ringlets, golden—
Asking to help you?

Sculpting sandwiches, salads, spreading butter,
Layering turkey slices, shredding lettuce,
Smiling (see those commas round her smiling)—
Nothing astounding,

Yet she stirs you: feel her in your rib cage,
Dust-winged butterfly buffeting, seeking air space,
Decades after first you felt that fluttering,
Breathless a moment,

Shot by Eros—zing! straight through the eyeball!
Painless—test the point of impact?—even
Honey-seeming sweetness spreading through you
Soft as a smoothie:

Love at sight—not lust, no itch to touch her—
Gods forbid! Apollo, Hera, Hestia,
Guard this hearth, this marriage bed, this heart from
Rapt Aphrodite.

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Leave her standing back of the head-high counter
Serving customers, uncrowned queen of the food court,
Find a consort for her, matchingly handsome,
Bless them with babies.

*

Older than her father, none of her business,
Other than purchasing salads, sandwiches,
Carrot juice, struck dumb by her unintended
Thunderous lightning.

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MICHAEL McFEE

Memoir

I don't remember the year, the date, the day
of the week or time of the weekday, the weather
outside the schoolhouse window or inside the room
when I volunteered to read that now-forgotten text.
Was it poetry or prose? It was something nobody
was willing to read aloud to the rest of the class
except me, I'd always been bookish, *teacher's pet,*
my eager hand was probably polishing the air
over my head, the invisible student-halo I wore,
though I can't say for sure. I have no earthly idea
if the teacher picked me because I was her lapdog
and she loved me, or because she was just tired
and didn't want to read it herself, or maybe because
(now that I'm a teacher, yes, I can imagine this)
she wanted to set me up to fail, to teach me
a first lesson in hubris, a word I'd never forget.
I simply don't know. I do know that I stood up
and began reading without the least uncertain pause
from a book I'd never seen before, surrounded
by silence and the sense of being chosen, singular,
a soloist sight-reading to the baffled orchestra,
soon I'd finish and the conductor would applaud
and I'd return to my seat shining with rightness!
But then it happened: an odd word loomed ahead:
its letters were like nothing I'd ever seen before:
I knew I could never say or fake or skip it:
it had to be dealt with: whatever was I to do?
I've tried for decades to remember what it was—
insidious French phrase? polysyllabic behemoth?
simplest English word gone weird, crumbling
to nonsense the instant my eyesight touched it?—
but I can't bring it back, it's vanished forever.

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A shrink, presented with such paltry evidence,
might say I repressed those unutterable syllables
out of fear for their consequences in my writing
or became a writer to discover that lost word,
the source of creation's *Fiat*, or of the creator.
And maybe he'd be right. I really can't say
any more than I can finally speak the word itself
or recover the details of that scene long ago
through some sort of hypnotic suggestion
or invent a memory that never really existed:
what I was wearing, which girl sat closest to me,
whether the feeble lights were buzzing overhead,
the ripe smell of our third-floor room in spring.
But I'll never forget plowing through that word
then halting, knowing I'd said it all wrong,
and hearing the teacher snicker, which released
the pent-up laughter in that illiterate class
and paralyzed me where I stood, suddenly
blushing and needing to pee and wanting to die,
the unspoken words on the page still waiting
for me to take them into my big brain and mouth
and say them so that everyone could forget them,
then and at any oblivious time in the future.

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KAREN WILKIN

The Glory of Our Age: Delacroix's Late Work

"WHAT IS THIS STRANGE, MSTERIOUS QUALITY which Delacroix, to the glory of our age, has interpreted better than anyone else?" Charles Baudelaire asked this in an ardently enthusiastic obituary, published as a long letter to the editor of *Opinion Nationale*. The answer is slightly breathless: "It is the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the *soul*; and this he has done—allow me, please, to emphasize this point—with no other means but color and contour." Extravagant? Yes, but also perceptive, vivid evidence of why Baudelaire's criticism remains worth reading. Even though he claimed he valued works of art most for the stimulus they provided for his imagination, his emphasis on the formal characteristics of Delacroix's art bears witness to how much the poet-critic absorbed of what painters really talk about, how much he learned from spending time in the studio and listening to his friend discuss what he was up to.

Baudelaire's panegyric is admittedly somewhat over-the-top, but so was his subject. "Powerful colorist, daring innovator, he was the head of the Romantic school," says the *Larousse Illustré*. Delacroix is known as the heir of Géricault, the enemy of Ingres, the friend of Baudelaire and Stendhal, the illustrator of Poe and Walter Scott—in short, as the revolutionary painter whose super-heated imagination issued a challenge to classicism's sterile homage to the Greek and Roman past. "Delacroix" stands for emotionally charged, painterly painting: scenes of violence, heroics, exoticism, and dreadful things happening to both endangered species and their tormentors, all rendered with dramatic contrasts and clashes of brilliant hues. Delacroix is associated, too, with portraits of such paradigms of the Romantic movement as his friends Chopin and George Sand, and Paganini. His name conjures up, as well, monuments to nineteenth-century bombast—vast, often splendid public *machines* that hang in the Grande Galerie of the Louvre and huge decorative schemes that enliven government buildings and churches all over Paris.

Controversial in his own day and well into this century, Delacroix's work initially met with a distinctly mixed critical and popular response. It remained so, although on the whole, his career began auspiciously enough and continued well. Despite its rather problematic reception, even the first canvas the twenty-four-year-old painter submitted to the

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Paris Salon, *The Bark of Dante*, shown in 1822, was bought by the French government for a respectable sum, setting a pattern for State acquisition of his later Salon submissions. That these pictures were purchased, even though they were not universally admired, has been seen as evidence of the young Delacroix's having had a protector in high government circles, a theory used to support yet another over-the-top aspect of his history—the persistent rumor that his real father was Talleyrand.

Whatever his parentage, Delacroix became something of a national institution, complete with disciples and assistants, achieving, despite continuing controversy, substantial critical recognition and material success. From the time he reached forty until his death at sixty-five, in 1863, he received commission after commission to embellish the official edifices of, successively, the Bourbon Restoration, the Second Republic and the Second Empire. Either Delacroix became so illustrious that he was unaffected by changes in political fashion or we must assume that he was not only supported by a consummate politician father who managed to thrive no matter what the regime, but that he had inherited his diplomatic skills. Whatever the explanation, the artist's studio in the garden of the building where he lived on the Place Furstenberg offers convincing testimony to the impressive scale of what would now be called his "enterprise." So does the fact that at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855, thirty-six of Delacroix's paintings were installed in a gallery devoted to his work, including a specially commissioned new large canvas of a lion hunt—his choice of subject.

For sheer ambition, worldly success, and frequent over-the-topness, Rubens is one of the few old masters who stands comparison with Delacroix. But while the seventeenth-century giant's fame and wealth may have fueled his nineteenth-century counterpart's aspirations, it was Rubens' art, rather than his career, that Delacroix strove to emulate. Rubens was one of his idols (along with Titian, whom Rubens idolized). Rubens' voluptuous, heroic subject matter appealed to Delacroix equally, I suspect, for its lushness and for its solid literary and philosophical grounding, since, like his painter-diplomat-humanist predecessor, Delacroix was widely read and genuinely cultivated, but what appears to have impressed him most was the way Rubens (and Titian before him) could construct a picture with masses of color. Delacroix's work demonstrates plainly how profoundly struck he was by these artists' ability to embody a conception by drawing and painting at the same time, building an image with bold strokes of a loaded brush, instead of carefully outlining in pencil and then filling in with "well licked" seamlessly shaded hues, as the Academy insisted that its students learn to do.

Delacroix's study of his chosen ancestors bore fruit. For generosity of scale, robustness of form, and juiciness of paint handling, not to mention intensity of feeling rendered "with no other means but color and contour," Delacroix is one of the few near-modern masters who stands comparison with Rubens—a pairing he would have loved, to judge by an entry in the journal he kept, off and on, from the year he

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first showed at the Salon. (This record of the painter's daily life and aesthetic concerns is one of the most absorbing, revealing documents of the nineteenth century.)

"How superior [Rubens] is to the collection of small qualities that make up the whole stock of other painters!" Delacroix wrote. "He, at least had the courage to be himself; he compels you to accept his so-called defects, that come from the impetus with which he is swept along, and wins you over, in spite of precepts that hold good for everyone but himself. Rubens did not correct himself, and he was right. By permitting himself every liberty, he carries you to heights which the greatest painters barely attain. He dominates, he overwhelms you with so much liberty and audacity."

Delacroix, too, permitted himself every liberty, in an effort to attain the heights he praised in Rubens, but sometimes, especially at first, he was soundly criticized for doing so. When, for example, the thirty-year-old painter exhibited his enormous, operatic vision of luxury and carnage, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, in the Paris Salon of 1828, it was greeted with hostility, and he was frequently taken to task for "incorrect" drawing. It would be reasonable, then, to think that the entry on Rubens was written in the early part of Delacroix's career, as self-justification for an eager young artist whose chosen path and whose strengths took him in quite other directions than the Academy's solemn procession towards the ancient past. Yet, surprisingly, the passage turns out to have been written in October 1860, less than three years before Delacroix died. Evidently, even at the peak of his reputation, presumably able to indulge his desire for "liberty and audacity" in his own work with the admirable freedom that sometimes comes to very good artists once they reach sixty or so, he still found it helpful to remind himself that his own bent had distinguished antecedents.

The journal is full of such surprises. "David's work is an extraordinary mixture of realism and the ideal," Delacroix wrote in February 1860. "He shut himself up, so to speak with the Laocoön, the Antinoüs, the Gladiator, and the other great male conceptions of the spirit of antique art, and was courageous enough to fashion a new talent for himself. . . . He was the father of the whole modern school of painting and sculpture. . . . In some respects he is still supreme." Perhaps still more unexpected are the lengthy discussions of Poussin, preparations for an admiring article Delacroix published in the 1850s, praising the *peintre-philosophe*, the high priest of Academic classicism, as "one of the greatest innovators," a painter in whose work "independence of all convention is very marked." This from the painter who is generally believed to have opposed everything the classicists stood for. Or did he?

Delacroix's beloved Rubens and Titian, in spite of the opulence of their paint handling and the richness of their color, in spite of the looseness and vigor of their drawing, were deeply knowledgeable about the antique and constantly alluded to the classical past, both formally and iconographically, in their art. Substitute "Poussin" for "the classical past" and this description will do for Delacroix's efforts, as well. The

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Larousse Illustré may pigeonhole him as "head of the Romantic school," but he seems to have aspired to something more complex: the synthesis of the apparently opposing notions he responded to in the work of the artists he admired most. It's worth nothing that the highest praise Delacroix could find for Rossini, a composer he thought "a man of genius," was that "when he wishes, he knows how to combine the *true* with the *ideal*." For the first few minutes, of course, Delacroix's pictures seem quirkily and stubbornly individual. Their urgent brushwork, dense surfaces, and (most notably in pictures that have been cleaned recently) full-bodied color, seem, at first, to be expressions of pure will in the sway of heightened emotion, unmediated by other considerations—to be wholly Romantic, that is—but they quickly reveal their debt to a remarkable range of sources.

If you walk though the Louvre, you soon discover that the dead and dying sailors in Géricault's icon of the Romantic movement, *The Raft of the "Medusa,"* 1819, (for which Delacroix posed), are clearly the immediate ancestors of the tortured souls and the recoiling poet of Delacroix's 1822 *Bark of Dante*, but there's also an echo of austere antique geometry in the painting's firm underpinnings. In the same way, Poussin, as well as Delacroix's own feverish imagination, informs the exhausted figures in the foreground of *The Massacre at Scio*, his 1826 homage to the contemporary struggle dear to every right-thinking Romantic's heart, the Greek effort to throw off Turkish domination. The same volatile mixture of past high-mindedness and current events is visible in the triangular composition and piled bodies of his stirring *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, while Géricault's ghost is still present in the way this celebration of heroism at the barricades reads like *The Raft of the "Medusa"* run aground and seen from the other side. A very different, more intimate and sensuous image, the ravishing *Women of Algiers*, 1834, reverberates with Delacroix's enthusiasm for Titian, as well as his memories of his 1832 trip to Morocco. And so on.

Yet even with prolonged looking, this increasing awareness of the variousness of Delacroix's chosen ancestry does nothing to weaken your sense of the force of his personality or of his uniqueness as a painter. Nor does it lessen your awareness of his powers of observation. No matter how exotic the subject, how highly seasoned the palette, Delacroix presents everything with such conviction that he can seem a realist. Like a great nineteenth-century novelist, he offers a cast of characters and a set of situations larger, more dramatic, and organized into clearer patterns than life, but still wholly believable. Like Rubens, he convinces you with his overwhelming "liberty and audacity." Improbable poses and questionable rendering—according to both Academic standards and normal logic—seem irrelevant; literary themes and remote settings seem plausible. Paint takes over; "no other means but color and contour."

If you had any doubt that "head of the Romantic school" does not begin to account for Delacroix's real achievement—and for the pleasure of seeing a lot of wonderful pictures—the recent exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (seen earlier in Paris), "Delacroix: The

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Late Work," was not to be missed.[1] An intelligently selected, handsomely installed survey of the painter's last thirteen years, jointly organized with the Réunion des Musées Nationaux in honor of the 200th anniversary of his birth in 1798, the show is proof that Delacroix is not only one of the giants of the nineteenth century, but that far from being easy to categorize, he was among the most complicated and paradoxical of painters. It's possible to make a case for him as paradigmatic of his age and at the same time as both the last old master and the first modernist. The Philadelphia exhibition is deliberately limited, out of choice, since it focuses on a circumscribed period of a career lasting four decades, and out of necessity, since Delacroix's last great decorative schemes are, by their very nature, untransportable. But in his last years, in part because of deteriorating health, he concentrated much of his energy on easel painting; and by assembling a fine group of these relatively intimate works (and some related drawings), both familiar and unfamiliar, from all over the world, the exhibition presents Delacroix whole: as an artist very much of his moment, who nonetheless saw his work as inextricably connected to the great historical tradition of Western art.

The declared goal of the curators, Arlette Sérullaz, Vincent Pomarède, and Joseph J. Rishel, was to show "how Delacroix was actually aiming to achieve a synthesis of historical and modern art," and they have succeeded admirably. Their subject emerges as a forward-looking innovator who honored the Baroque and the classical, a revolutionary who revered the past. And with the clear vision and helpful perspective provided by hindsight, we can also see that Delacroix's work prefigured what we know as the future of Western painting—the Impressionists, van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, and more.

The show is organized thematically, contrasting subjects Delacroix explored mainly in his last years—which the curators categorize as "wild animals and hunts, landscapes and flowers, and religious scenes"—with persistent motifs that had preoccupied him since the beginning of his career—literary, theatrical, and Oriental themes, allegories and mythological subjects—partly in support of the curators' thesis that the aging, infirm painter was looking back at what he had achieved in the course of his life as a painter. But while the exhibition looks wonderful and the pictures speak eloquently to each other, the cumulative effect is paradoxically to diminish the significance of subject matter in Delacroix's work, except as a springboard for his attention to more painterly issues. It is true, of course, that from first to last, Delacroix turned frequently to literature as the basis of his pictures. As a young man, he admonished himself repeatedly in his journal to read more, in order to stimulate his imagination and provide himself with a stock of worthy themes; as the exhibition makes plain, he continued to draw on these motifs, painting as a mature artist, as he had in his youth, abductions and battles described by Byron and Walter Scott, dramatic moments from Goethe

[1] "Delacroix: The Late Work," Philadelphia Museum of Art, 15 September 1998–3 January 1999.

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and Shakespeare, and pivotal scenes from Ariosto and Ovid. The effect of the Philadelphia show, however, is to suggest that the mature Delacroix staged his literary pictures for maximum action and contrast rather than for narrative clarity. It's hard to tell, for example, just what the relationship is between the Bride of Abydos and the scimitar-wielding, exotically clad Greek warrior beside her in any of the exhibition's three versions of the picture; is she clinging to him or pushing him away? The wall text and the catalogue helpfully provide the relevant portions of Byron's poem, but in the end, the story seems less important than Delacroix's glorious harmonies of dull red, blue, gold, and violet, the seductive shifts of surface from thick to thin, or the nervous rhythms, echoed by his rapid brushstroke, of gesticulating limbs and flying drapery.

Again and again, any effort to follow a narrative, however familiar or arcane, with or without the aid of the appropriate text, gives way to the pure marvelousness of *painting*. Who is doing what and why, even in the potentially *frisson*-provoking scenes of big cats, Arab huntsmen, and horses doing unspeakable things to each other, seems far less important than the stunning, dramatically inflected orchestration of color and surface, the play of transparent blues, malachite greens, glowing sienas and crimsons that attest to how much Delacroix learned from the Venetians. The astonishing, steadily tightening spiral composition of the 1854 *Tiger Hunt* (Musée d'Orsay)—which culminates a tight, bloodthirsty knot of whirling cat, rearing horse, and Arab about to thrust a spear—quickens the pulse far more than the ferocious subject. It's interesting that among the glories of the exhibition are Delacroix's sensual paintings of flowers and intimate, but spectacular seascapes and studies of clouds. Their strength—for twentieth-century eyes, at least—is partly due to the "neutrality" of their subjects, which allows or forces their painterly merits to be the main event (which is why later generations of painters concentrated on such motifs instead of the grandiose themes with which their predecessors showed their mettle).

Of course, Delacroix's flower paintings and landscapes are fascinating simply as evidence of another side of the master of the heroic, the gory, and the exotic, which is not to discount the potency of his more overtly "Romantic" motifs. There is no doubt that the heroic, the gory, and especially the exotic profoundly stirred Delacroix's imagination, at the end as much as at the beginning of his career. Many of his preferred literary subjects, such as Byron's Oriental tales, allowed him to indulge his Romantic's taste for the unfamiliar and the remote. In his last years Delacroix returned, too, to orientalist subjects inspired by his trip to Morocco almost thirty years earlier, drawing equally on the watercolors he had made on the spot in 1832 and on the transforming effects of memory to produce dazzlingly colored scenes of Arab horsemen, lion hunters, the occasional odalisque, and views of exotic interiors. Often the result is more intense and arresting than anything in the watercolors, fresh and immediate as they are: witness the Louvre's powerful, modestly scaled 1860 painting of two stallions fighting in a dim,

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Rembrandt-esque stable, their tangled, plunging forms dappled with golden, dusty light against a flicker of dull red and earth tones.

The exhibition ends with a group of Delacroix's brooding religious pictures. Here, perhaps, his debt to Poussin, Rubens, and the Italians he studied in the Louvre is both most obvious and most subordinate to his own robust paint-handling and dramatic tonalities. At the same time, these pictures point clearly to van Gogh and to the Cézanne of the early bacchanals. Four of the multiple versions of *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* that Delacroix painted between 1840 and 1854 are mustered as though to emphasize the image's reading as a hinge between tradition and modernism. The subject—Christ sleeping through the storm in a crowded rowboat tipped by threatening waves—is conventional enough; so is the way you are encouraged to study each figure's terrified response. The diagonal placement of the boat, like the figure with the wind-whipped cloak, are perhaps distant echoes of Géricault's *Raft*, but the contrast of luminous, golden brown flesh tones against a viridian sea and the agitated brushstrokes are Delacroix's own. Most unexpected (especially in the c. 1840–45 version from the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City) is the way the painter places the most brilliant color note—a cadmium red robe—not on Christ, but on a worried disciple. Christ's blue cloak, in fact, serves simply to set off the cadmium. As a result, you see the disciple first and then must work through the rest of the crowd to find the protagonist. A metaphor for religious experience?

Perhaps. Certainly the speed and weight of Delacroix's touch connote engagement and deep feeling. Delacroix's relationship to his subject matter, however, raises many questions. Two months before his death, he wrote: "The first quality in a picture is to be a delight for the eyes. This does not mean that there need be no sense in it; it is like poetry which, if it offend the ear, all the sense in the world will not save from being bad." Then there is the question raised by the multiple versions of the picture, which attest to Delacroix's need—like Rubens'—to produce work simply to meet the demands of his collectors. But this, and other absorbing issues, such as how Delacroix was seen by his contemporaries, his relationships with patronage and collectors, and the history of the reception of his work in the U.S., are thoroughly dealt with in the exhibition's thoughtful, informative catalogue essays by the curators and the Delacroix scholar Lee Johnson.[2] There is also an excellent chronology and a fascinating dissection of Delacroix's technique. And the reproductions are pretty good. All in all, a worthy record and a fine supplement to a superb exhibition. That Delacroix seems no easier to pin down as a result should not be surprising. After all, this is the man who wrote in 1860, "Experience ought to teach us two things; first that we should do a great deal of correcting; secondly, that we must not correct too much."

[2] *Delacroix: The Late Work*, by Arlette Sérullaz, Vincent Pomarède, Joseph J. Rishel, Lee Johnson, Louis-Antoine Prat, David Liot. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Urban Drama

THE SUMMER OF 1998 IN NEW YORK was a "best of seasons/worst of seasons" affair: a mountain of Pre-Raphaelite disdain for the modern era at the Metropolitan's Edward Burne-Jones retrospective, 120 Andrew Wyeth landscapes at the Whitney (each one grayer, gloomier, and more barren than the next), and the same number of motorcycles at the Guggenheim (about fifty more than any student of design needed to see), offset by a few uncommonly strong shows. Among the latter were MoMA's Pierre Bonnard exhibition, the New York Historical Society's William Sidney Mount retrospective, and a survey of Robert Colescott's recent work at the Queens Museum. Overall, though, a better time was to be had in Washington, D.C., where the Corcoran's 45th Biennial took the form of a survey of its previous biennials (a Mary Cassatt-to-Ida Applebroog tour of changing tastes); the National Museum of American Art hosted an excellent Stuart Davis show; the Hirshhorn memorialized the late Carlos Alfonzo; and the National Gallery of Art presented three of the best exhibitions I have seen there in a while, including the only American stop of the Musée D'Orsay's visual and intellectual challenge, "Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare."

The theme of the city and its role in the development of modern art has the feel of something that has been done to death, but in reality it is possible to count on one hand the number of museum exhibitions in the last decade that have treated the subject in an in-depth way and—not surprisingly—an urban world like that of mid-nineteenth-century Paris offers various angles from which to consider the topic. In that sense, "Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare" was about several overlapping issues, including French art in the 1870s and the supremacy of Manet, the Franco-Prussian War and the recovery from that madness, eroticism, industrialization, the triumph of government control, and the very different approaches that can be taken at any time to the exhausting parade of city life. A confluence of a few of these issues was suggested in the placement of Henri Fantin-Latour's imposing *A Studio in the Batignolles* (1870) at the start of the show. Manet, seated, occupies center stage in this large room in the urbanized Batignolles district, painting his friend and admirer, the critic Zacharie Astruc. Standing in a chaotic spatial relationship to artist and sitter are Renoir, Monet, Zola, Otto Scholderer, Edmond Maître, and Frédéric Bazille. Zola was eventually to write about the prelude to the war in his novel *The Debacle*, an analysis of the rot at the heart of France's self-mythologizing, and to lose patience

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with Manet's "unfinished" style. (His reservations are in contrast to the unwavering faith of Stéphane Mallarmé, whose sumptuous 1876 portrait by Manet hung in the last gallery in Washington, D.C.) Monet lurks in the shadows at the right edge of the canvas. Bazille stands tall in front of him, the most physically formidable of the eight after Manet, only months away from his pointless battlefield death at the age of twenty-nine.

The collapse of the Second Empire was swift and dramatic, but France was not immediately released from its self-imposed nightmare with the fall of Napoleon III. Manet's 1868 lithograph *The Execution of Maximilian* (censored by the government, of course) attacked the Emperor's overseas ambitions which three years earlier had resulted in the humiliating assassination of the man he had placed on the throne of Mexico, while the 1871 lithographs—*The Barricade, Civil War, Line in Front of the Butcher's Shop*—allude to the Siege of Paris and the violence of the Commune, when Frenchmen, done fighting the Prussians, turned on other Frenchmen. The small oil in the first gallery, *Effect of Snow at Petit-Montrouge* (1870), also gave us a more brutish, less picturesque Paris than the fabled "City of Light" image. But one subtext to this exhibition was resilience and reconstruction: Émile Vernier's women on the ramparts, Puvis de Chavannes's allegorical *Hope* (white-robed in the Walters Art Gallery version, nude in the Musée D'Orsay finished sketch), and Berthe Morisot's woman and child on a balcony surveying the postwar scene run the gamut from predictable to corny to emotionally stirring, but they all have in common a wish to leave the recent past behind, to look beyond the brutality. The disjunctions and uncertainties of that new world in the making—our world—were best evoked, this show implied, by artists like Manet and Mallarmé, who had less use for pat, concrete, or even fully comprehensible resolutions.

By any standards, the least pat image of the day was the centerpiece of "Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare," Manet's *Chemin de Fer* (as he titled it), better known to us as *The Railway* (1872). The grandly nude picnicker of *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, the voluptuous courtesan of *Olympia*, and the mysterious *Woman with Parrot* has become an even more enigmatic figure; model Victorine Meurent, now possibly a mother or governess, sits outdoors in contemporary attire with her book and puppy in her lap, staring indifferently at us. A little girl in a white dress, her back to us, clutches the tall black iron rails of the train yard, lost in the spectacle of smoke and motion. (A fine, penetrating head-and-shoulders portrait of Victorine from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts hung on a nearby wall in the same gallery, rightly according the young woman her own persona, for a brief moment anyway.) Newspaper caricaturists went mad with *The Railway*, and a good number of the funnier ones were on view, parodying the inexpressiveness of face and posture Manet has effected, the unreadability of his premise (are the figures caged? what is their relationship to one another, to us?), and its compositional awkwardness. The wonder of the painter's brushwork, its concern for

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texture over story, was understandably lost in a mad yelp of confusion and indignation. Artists aplenty were depicting the urban milieu, especially the Gare Saint-Lazare and the widened boulevards Baron Haussmann had created in his demolition of the old Paris, but why had Manet crowded the key elements of the child's vista into a fractured, steam-obscured, disorienting jumble? Where was the civic glory, the dynamism, the reassurance? The bunch of grapes on the stone ledge at the lower right edge of the canvas adds insult to injury, still-life forms mocked by the grill of the iron bars and the absence of any sensual ease.

On the other hand, it can't be said that Manet earned the admiration of his era with his more clear-cut work, either. His 1877 portrait of Zola's anti-heroine, *Nana*, may not have the crazed, debauched quality of Charles Demuth's later watercolor illustrations of that novel, but it is tart enough. Victorine Meurent's empty stare in *The Railway* has been replaced with a newer model's come-hither glance as a gentleman in evening dress appraises her ample, partially unclad backside. A powder puff, puffy pillows, a mirror, a stiff cane in hand: sensual ease, that hallmark of French art of the 1870s, has become something nearer to smutty bloat. Pickups and gropings *en masse* (the 1873 *Masked Ball at the Opera*) and ennui at the cafés (the 1878 *Plum Brandy*) affirm Maupassant's more jaundiced view of the age, in the same forceful way that the Getty Museum's *Rue Mosnier Decorated with Flags* (1878), one of the masterworks of urban Impressionism, comments on a rising tide of patriotism and its always-terrible costs. The one-legged man on crutches hobbling along the curb (a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War?), largely a few smudges of blue paint, was the last, lonely figure we saw as we approached the door of the final gallery.

In the light of this testimony to Edouard Manet as a founding father of Modernism, it took some effort to decide what we were to make of the other artists in this sizable exhibition. Gustave Caillebotte, Jean Béraud, Norbert Goeneutte, even Claude Monet seem limited when compared to the intellectual and stylistic range of Manet (Puvis de Chavannes needs scarcely be mentioned), and others like Berthe Morisot were too under-represented to bear comparison. Yet the extra-aesthetic purposes of "Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare" were as vitally apparent in the work of these painters as in the show's topographical maps of pre- and post-"Haussmannized" Paris, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs of the Pont de l'Europe, the postcards and cartoons. The reinvented city did not need to call forth the same kind of response. Béraud's realist *Place and Pont de l'Europe* (1876) is people-centered, a collage of "types," a venue for sideways glances from married men and delivery boys carrying bouquets to waiting mistresses. Caillebotte, sumptuous with his slate-blues, is more enthralled by monumentality and structure, both in the design complexities of his own pictures and in the edifice of the railyard trellis. For Goenuette and Monet, the latter represented in one overpowering room by almost a dozen of his Impressionist views of the Gare Saint-Lazare, the interaction of nature

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and metropolis—light on rooftops, blasts of smoke in a night sky, shadows and tracks—was the more interesting story. If we are more likely today to share Manet's doubts and quirks, that fact does not minimize the value of other temperaments, other perspectives.

The growth of Paris after midcentury wasn't only a matter of buildings and boulevards, though. A smaller exhibition on the main floor of the East Wing, "Artists and the Avant-Garde Theater in Paris, 1887–1900," was an enticing if less complex complement to the Gare Saint-Lazare show. Documenting a moment in European cultural history equivalent to the early days of the off-Broadway movement in New York in the fifties, three galleries focused on the adventurous work done by André Antoine in founding the Théâtre Libre and Aurélien Lugné-Poe in establishing the Théâtre de L'Oeuvre. Reacting to the lackluster fare and hollow performance styles of mainstream French theater, their goals were to introduce audiences to the "offensive" plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Jarry, and Wilde and replace traditional declamation with realistic acting—in short, to make theater honest and exciting once again, a purpose never out of date. On display at the National Gallery were seventy-odd prints and drawings commissioned by Antoine and Lugné-Poe for their playbills and posters by artists such as Bonnard, Vuillard, Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Signac, Edvard Munch, Félicien Rops, and Theodore van Rysselberghe.

We always remember such moments in history by their high points, naturally enough; the genesis of off-Broadway connotes Edward Albee and Sam Shepard, not the countless playwrights no one has heard of since 1970. In the same vein, it was interesting to ponder the varied productions, some probably dreadful, which these now-legendary directors and painters promoted. For every inventive staging of *Salome* and *Ghosts*, audiences no doubt suffered through a dozen clinkers. If Aurélien Scholl's *His Wife's Lover* (1890) and Jean Laurenty's *Incestuous Souls* (1896) shocked the bourgeoisie, all well and good, but who other than a doctoral pedant is going to know anything about those writers and plays today? Yet the atmosphere of trial and error, of young men shaking off a hidebound past, of the zaniness of *Ubu Roi* and *Peer Gynt*, is irresistible (especially at this low point in the American theater), and we feel it in the presence of the unfamiliar names and titles—the images without context for us—as much as we do in Felix Vallotton's brooding sketch for an 1894 production of *The Father* and Théophile Steinlen's depiction five years later of Stockmann before the mob in *An Enemy of the People*. Not to mention Henri-Gabriel Ibels, who seems to have driven everyone crazy by refusing to accommodate his playbill designs to the text of the plays they were meant to illustrate. This Gauguin disciple was majestically indifferent to an author's plot or characters, insisting that it was enough that he should produce credible, amusing drawings of the "types" the play dealt with, and so he did.

An even smaller three-room exhibition at the National Gallery took us further back in time, to a culture with an unappeasable appetite for

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strangeness and variety. "A Collector's Cabinet" was a re-creation of a *kunstkamer*, the term—circa 1600—used for the room in a private Dutch or Flemish townhouse given over to the encyclopedic collecting interests of its owner. Art lovers, or *liefhebbers*, who had the means to indulge their passion for *artificialia* (i.e., drawings, paintings, instruments of navigation, ancient coins) and *naturalia* (particularly shells and coral) did so with a robust disregard for focus or uniformity in their acquisitions and great satisfaction with their own powers of intellect and financial capability. The timing was right, to be sure. Distant lands were opening their secrets to a newly independent, far-reaching mercantile culture, humanism was proclaiming man's place at the center of the universe, and the gap between science and aesthetics had yet to manifest itself. Loosely based on two paintings that depict just such crowded, fascinating spaces—Jan Brueghel the Elder's *The Archduke Albert and the Archduchess Isabella in a Collector's Cabinet* (c. 1620) from the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore and Jan Brueghel the Younger's *Venus and Cupid in a Collector's Cabinet* (c. 1630) from the Philadelphia Museum of Art—the three tiny, recently refurbished "cabinet" galleries in the West Wing a few steps from the rotunda were transformed into miniature private museums of the sort we might have visited had we known the right people in Antwerp in the late sixteenth century.

To a society like ours that divides utilitarian domestic objects, scientific tools, nature's bounty, graphic art, and oil on canvas into discrete categories of experience, one of the strongest feelings this show evoked had to do with the healthiness of a less specialized approach to life. Anything different, anything well-made, interested these people. Wonder in the face of divine and human creativity was the point (along with that touch of hubris implied by an effort to bring a microcosm of the world into your own house). A second curatorial intention was to show how effectively so many diverse objects "worked" in this context—and how potent *small* and *random* can be. In a room no larger than an average bedroom in a city apartment, sixteen paintings filled the walls with total indifference to thematic consistency: mythology, still life, an Adriaen Brouwer country-bumpkin grotesque, an estuary at dawn, the martyrdom of Saint Catherine, a Hals portrait, a classic Vermeer. A third gallery held twenty-eight pictures, many with dimensions of no more than several inches. The narrower middle gallery was given over to globes, telescopes, maps, lacquered boxes, jewelry from around the world, Chinese flutes, Roman coins, Byzantine medallions, Dürer's famous drawing of a rhinoceros (unknown in Europe before one was sent from India as a gift to King Manuel I of Portugal), and—an especially prized category of exotica in the 1600s—chunks of coral from the Caribbean. As the exhibition occupied so little space, it was possible to keep looping one's way through the three richly paneled rooms and back around again every twenty minutes or so, focusing on a different wall or surface each trip, a method (antithetical to the usual museum forge-ahead style) which added to the fun.

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And, decidedly, *fun* was the subtext of this odd show. One of the last paintings to be seen in the third room, on the wall by the exit door, was *Ice Scene with Golfers* (c. 1625), measuring only eleven by twenty inches, by Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634). Avercamp did for frozen lakes and skaters what Pieter Saenredam did for empty white cathedrals. Every strolling couple and area of windy, open space, every peasant's hood and nobleman's collar, every patch of pinkish sky and snow-dusted ice, takes us down a different path of atmosphere and story, of social history and delight in minute observation. This is the personable, idiosyncratic side of the world that gave us Rubens and Rembrandt. This is the more relaxed side of the brilliant, compulsive, cosmopolitan milieu of the *liefhebbers* and their well-stocked *kunstkamers*.

For many people, the story of American art probably begins with Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer or, in the expatriate mode, Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent. For a variety of reasons, talented early nineteenth-century artists like George Caleb Bingham and William Sidney Mount are footnote names. In the latter case, "William Sidney Mount: Painter of American Life" at the New York Historical Society (which is at the Amon Carter Museum in Dallas this winter) was a good demonstration of the less obvious aesthetic merits of that hazy territory between Gilbert Stuart and Eakins-Homer-Cassatt. The originator of American genre painting, Mount (1807–1868) was also a keen-eyed observer of faces, a fact made evident by the first picture in the Historical Society's show, a superbly direct, buoyant, and unromanticized self-portrait from 1832. Mount's gifts as draftsman and colorist seem so much the greater when we remember how little art instruction and how few European models were available to American painters coming to adulthood in the Age of Jackson. Opportunities for a Long Islander to profit from Ingres, Millet, and Corot were simply nonexistent. But the self-portrait thrusts before us an individual who, for better or worse, will see the world through his own eyes.

Some small caricatures of heads from the 1820s based on Hogarth engravings, the inevitable imitation of Benjamin West (e.g., the 1828 *Saul and the Witch of Endor*), and the "primitive" quality of *Girl with Pitcher* (1829) point to a hodgepodge of native influences, but this exhibition was rightly not interested in dwelling on the unformed Mount. His evocation of his own time and place is his claim on posterity. The composition of *School Boys Quarreling* (1830) is straight from David's *Oath of the Horatii*, but the mood of the painting is implicitly transitional, as if the Old World is finally releasing its hold. In fact, the painting has been read as an allegory of the fight between art world traditionalists looking to London, led by the aging John Trumbull, and the new men of the Samuel F.B. Morse camp. The Morse side—American men for American themes—is clearly ascendant. Yet these subtexts don't really, or don't excessively, intrude on a 1990s experience of William Sidney Mount. That balance is felt even when the undercurrent is more down-home

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political. *Catching Rabbits, or Boys Trapping* (1839) may indeed be about Whig baiting of gullible Democratic voters in the upcoming election or a Whig defeat by the supporters of Tippecanoe (rabbit = hare = hair = wig = Whig), but its coded messages aren't likely to take undue precedence for us today over its deftness of brushstroke, well-wrought detail, delicate colors, and winsome aura. In *Dance of the Haymakers* (1845) and the earlier *Long Island Farmer Husking Corn* (1833), a golden glow suffuses the pictures of men at both work and play. Not unlike George Caleb Bingham, Mount manages to be both chronicler and poet, without the saccharine or heavily symbolic quality of a contemporary like Francis William Edmonds. Even a picture with a high cuteness quotient, such as *Truant Gamblers* (1835), which in Edmonds' hands would have been exclusively about the hookey-playing boys soon to be whipped, it is easy to pass from the labored anecdote to an absorbing interest in the range of tans and brownish-yellows to be found in Mount's shingles, shadows, sand, stone, hay, and rotting wood.

Another far from negligible aspect of Mount's art has to do with his depiction of African-Americans. Though his surviving letters leave room for debate about his real views (Mount was not an abolitionist), the paintings themselves posit some healthy values, atypical for the antebellum years. His black men are more than incidental figures in a genre scene; they are as worthy of full portrait treatment as anyone, especially when they are talented musicians. The violinist of *Right and Left* (1850) and the subject of *The Banjo Player* (1856) are rendered with the same skill and dignity the artist applied to his own self-portrait. When the faces of blacks are caricatured, it is in the context of a packed-to-the-rafters genre work (e.g., *Rustic Dance after a Sleigh Ride*) in which the Hogarthian faces of the whites look just as ludicrous. The old black woman at the bow of the boat, poised to strike, in *Eel Spearing at Setauket* (1845) is a figure of concentration and ability, and the easy rapport between the black farmhand and the little boy tickling him with a stalk of hay in *Farmers Nooning* (1836) registers a shock by its very matter-of-factness and lack of racial hatred. Mount's is a more complete and artistically satisfying picture of America than many of his peers provided.

Of course, the fate of African-Americans and the nature of the imagery narrating their experience over the next 150 years is nothing for a civilized nation to be proud of. That sorry record has long been a force behind the art of Robert Colescott, the subject of a well-installed show of twenty paintings at the Queens Museum in 1998. The first African-American painter to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, in 1997, Colescott continues to work in a gestural, anarchic but rhythmic style, creating quasi-narratives about appropriation and prejudice that can engage us by their political subject matter, their surreal sense of space, their bombastic color, or even a single figure in his allusive and frenetic compositions. In the case of *White Boy* (1989), for example, it is the Picassoid masked figure that dominates the left edge of the picture, her arm growing like a tree branch up the side of

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the canvas culminating in a massive fist and pointed index finger at the top, that drew me back again and again more than anything else in a too-busy painting about interracial desire and the bigotry of miscegenation laws. In *School Days* (1988), it was the red-sweatered black kid with a pistol in his hand and a demonic grin, and in *Exotique* (1994), it was the dazzling black woman who corrects the white man coming on to her for her "exotique" qualities when "Afrocentrique" would be more to the point, if you please. People dance, float, stare, grab, bludgeon, devour, and hug in Colescott's pictorial arena, but one thing they don't do is politely occupy their own space and social category.

The Queens exhibition was a perfect introduction to Robert Colescott's art for anyone who only knows him from his much-reproduced *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* (1975). It featured an artist more craft-conscious than Jean-Michel Basquiat, more thematically focused than most of the 1980s Neo-Expressionists, and less numbingly earnest than political artists like Barbara Kruger or (on occasion) Sue Coe. The melting pot of yore is now a cauldron at high boil, but Colescott manages to blend his indignation with irony, some comedy, and lots of explicit drama—to keep us, in other words, still looking and thinking.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

In Twyla's Company

IT'S ALMOST ELEVEN O'CLOCK ON MONDAY THE 27TH OF JULY, summer of '98. Several anxious people are crowding around a harried official at the stage door of the Barbican Center in London. After they get checked in, they're given numbered badges and led in small groups to an elevator and then to a subterranean common room. There they drink coffee and chat in subdued clusters, waiting to be called to the next place. Some of the people look like dancers, some don't. They are all ages, colors, types. Finally someone announces an itinerary and instructions for the day, then conducts the crowd through innumerable yellow doors and claustrophobic corridors to a black-box arena studio called The Pit. There they're checked in again and told to find seats until their number is called. The room is already occupied by camerapersons, dancers, organizers, and a few observers, all waiting for the beginning of this latest edition of Twyla Tharp's *The One Hundreds.*

At the end of the sixties, the experimental dancers were emerging from their lofts to show their developing work to a wider public. The way things were then, no one had a real company or extensive opportunities to perform in standard theatrical venues. They often accepted out-of-town residencies where they'd offer a combination of performances, master classes, and personal appearances of various kinds. Twyla Tharp had only been out of college five years, but she already had a grapevine reputation for inventions that managed to be engaging at the same time as they were structurally and conceptually demanding. One of Tharp's singular assets is her attitude that any work can combine choreographic rigor with popular appeal. And, since neither the audience nor her own package of resources stays the same, a work can be reshaped and remixed over time, rather than frozen in some early moment of mint-perfection. By updating this way, she hopes to resist over-familiarity and burnout. This spirit of disciplined immediacy was present in the original *One Hundreds*, and remains in the evolved version of the piece that's being done today.

Explained by Tharp in the most schematic way, *The One Hundreds* consists of three sections: first, two dancers perform simultaneously 100 different phrases of movement, each separated by a four-second pause; second, five dancers, dancing simultaneously, each perform 20 of the 100 phrases; third, 100 people, dancing simultaneously, each perform

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one of the 100 phrases, showing the full set in 11 seconds. Conceptual art of the most antiseptic, alienated sort, you'd think.

And, as I remember the earliest version I saw, the first twenty-five minutes were pretty stark. But Tharp's movement was always absorbing, even this long string of objective elements, all the same duration, and not connected in any pattern you could fathom. When the five dancers did the second part, counterpoint entered the picture and called for the diffuse, global attention we were learning from a lot of other post-Cunningham choreography. By the time the one hundred performers swarmed onto the stage, you had adjusted your expectations. You weren't going to get organized dance movement. You weren't even going to see movement, just a blast of energy exploding like a single firecracker. Then—finis. Afterward, my mind's eye might have retrieved one or two individuals from the conflagration, but the whole piece stayed with me as a carefully contained buildup and a bang.

It seemed remarkable that in 1969–70 Twyla Tharp could have rounded up a hundred civilians to rehearse with her for 11 seconds of mass intensity. Maybe anyone could have staged a compressed mob scene with a hundred miscellaneous volunteers, but I'm convinced that it was a choreographic imagination, not crowd control, that made *The One Hundreds* successful.

> The participants in London were solicited through a note in the Barbican summer program flyer. Apparently no other announcement was made, although some newspapers picked up on the coming event too. Tharp didn't want dancers especially; she prefers laypersons for it, the more diverse the better. As the morning rehearsal starts, I can't tell who knows what. But gradually a method emerges. Four or five dancers from Tharp's company call out numbers and begin teaching the phrases. With an almost one-to-one ratio—sometimes two or three people work on the same phrase—the volunteers get their own personal coaches. The studio floor fills with duets and demonstrations. People shadow or mirror or follow after one another, all facing different directions, some traveling but most staying in place. The population shifts randomly as the ten- or fifteen-minute sessions end and the dancers bring out new recruits. The atmosphere is concentrated but good-natured, with none of the competitive tension that hangs over a dance class.
>
> After an hour I begin to hallucinate: this looks uncannily like some of Tharp's most appealing early dances (*Deuce Coupe*, *Push Comes to Shove*), where a scene that at first resembled rush hour turned out to be several choreographed small units working in calculated non-unison.

Tharp continued to use *The One Hundreds* as an icebreaker, always adapting it to the situation. During a 1977 company season at Brooklyn Academy, for instance, she gave *Half the One Hundreds*, presenting only

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50 of the phrases and 50 volunteers, many of them arts-world celebrities, on the opera house stage. Long ago, in the bell-bottom era, she taught the first phrase to Dick Cavett on nationwide TV. When I recently asked her for the date of this, she came back to the phone in an instant with, I guess, a photo in her hand. "Let's see, we do this by haircut. 1979. Yes. The same year as that thing with Sara and the lawnmower." When she staged the piece at Stanford University last spring and the University of Michigan in 1996, the mayors of those towns gamely traded in their roles as official greeters to accept her tutelage in the same first phrase.

In fact, the evolution of *The One Hundreds* could be a metaphor for Tharp's lifetime crusade to connect the audience with her work. By now the piece has become an evening-long show, a village pageant, and a guided tour through the cultural history of Tharp's America, with whiffs of Ed Sullivan.

> While the one hundred volunteers are learning their phrases, Tharp is circulating through the room accompanied by a videographer and one or two other assistants taking notes. Eventually she will have interviewed almost all the participants and observers. Her plan is to edit these tapes during the afternoon break, into a little documentary that she'll show in the evening's performance. She asks her subjects how they like the day, but she has another agenda. She tries to lead her interviewees into comparing the nineties with the sixties. Most of the participants today are too young to remember the sixties.

Hosting performances of *The One Hundreds* for the last couple of years, Tharp has adorned the piece with programmed nostalgia. Perhaps thinking of the movie *Hair*, which she abortively choreographed in 1978, she encourages participants to wear something that refers to the sixties and early seventies, and during the evening she stages contests for the best costumes.

At the Barbican, reminiscing about that bygone era when the piece was made, she screened homemade archival footage of the original Tharp trio trying out phrases in a field, and Rose Marie Wright dancing silkily across the campus at the University of Massachusetts while bemused academics and truckdrivers looked on. Although Tharp has a public image as a restless seeker after the new, there's probably no choreographer who's more attentive to history or more frank about honoring what her own dance has been through. She was an early documenter of performances, rehearsals, and preliminary sketches, all saved and stored for posterity. She's already thinking how to use the talk footage she got in London, Palo Alto, and Ann Arbor that didn't make it into performance clips. Maybe she'll edit this for a film, "Tharp Interviews the Sixties."

At the same time, she keeps doing maintenance on the stage works. They get slicker, but also more freighted with their previous lives. This also happens with Tharp's narrative of her work. At the Barbican she

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related a story from her autobiography, *Push Comes to Shove*, about how she created *The One Hundreds*. She seems to have had a cosmic vision while pregnant and living in the country, in which this tremendous, polyglot ensemble would represent everything in the universe. As we read this now, or hear her tell it in her ironic, diffident way, it can seem like epic mythologizing, or else embarrassing revelation. It seems out of place in the pragmatic nineties, and that's probably why Tharp offers it now.

Tharp is trying to bridge a thirty-year technological hiatus as well as an ideological gulf. Dancers wanted to look like shapeless, ordinary people in the sixties. Now, dancers are sculpted, virtuosic cyborgs, and secretaries sweat to look like them. I think Tharp has always believed there shouldn't be such a gap. Her most endearing dances were deceptively casual; she slipped you the virtuosity without pointing to it. In contrast, I remember one of Leonard Bernstein's preachy "modern music is good for you" New York Philharmonic afternoons in the sixties. Half the audience walked out and the unflappable John Cage was clearly undone at the end, when derision mixed with dutiful applause. Tharp doesn't offer art that way, as candy-coated medicine. In current versions of *The One Hundreds*, she invites us to share in memories of a simpler time, even to re-enact that time as best we can. She tries to take the revisionist art of the sixties as seriously as it was intended, even if it looks naive now.

Later in the day, Tharp's ballet-mistress, Shelley Washington Whitman, and some other assistants approach Tharp with a pile of clothes. She needs a costume for the evening, and by prior arrangement the presenters of *The One Hundreds* were to provide stuff from which she can make a selection.

She isn't thrilled with what they've unearthed, gauzy scarves with glittering decorations, gorgeous embroidered peasant dresses in handsome fabrics. Clearly, they aren't particularly sixties, and they aren't *her*. "It's not outlandish enough. It's too fashionable," she grumps, "They're too much like . . . costumes!" "How about this, Twyla?" says Shelley, draping another garment around her. "Does this look right to you? Can you see me out gardening in this? Where's the denim?" I hand her my denim jacket and she puts her arm in one sleeve, slinging a scarf over the other arm. "Yeah, this is more like it." Shelley holds up a skirt under the jacket. "Maybe we can do this. Go 'way and get me some." She gives me back the jacket. The Barbican assistants look crushed. "Those came from my daughter's dress-up box," one of them whispers.

By the evening, Tharp appears to have given up on her own costume. She flounces onstage with an assortment of scarves and veils carelessly looped over virtually the same clothes she wore during the day. She announces she is going to get rid of the "costume," and, without any further reference, she rakes the veils off one by one as she's talking and drops them on the floor.

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This costume stunt is another indication that Tharp has internalized the lessons of the sixties. She could so easily bring along her own costume designed precisely for these performances. But the idea of having to make do with what she finds is straight out of the aleatory techniques of Cage and Cunningham. One of Cunningham's most indeterminate dances (*Story*, 1963) credited its costume design to Robert Rauschenberg, who collected articles from secondhand emporiums in each town where the dance was performed. During the performance the dancers selected what to wear and how to wear it. Tharp, following Cunningham, would say this keeps a dance from always looking the same, and requires the performers to deal with any situation in which they might find themselves.

But Tharp isn't Cunningham. Instead of relying on a formal strategy for adapting unobtrusively to local exigencies, she often makes a point of the local color she's incorporated into the dance. She documents every new edition even as she consigns it to history. And she monitors each version, hoping to get better, become more authentic, and produce useful lessons for the future.

> During the afternoon rehearsal session, I chat with the woman next to me, who's waiting nervously for her number (#98) to be called. I ask if she's a dancer. No, she's never danced before but she's a ballet fan and a frustrated dancer, and she thought working with Twyla Tharp would be a terrific opportunity. She took the day off from her job as a credit analyst in a bank. "It's a chance to experience. You know, warmup, rehearsal, backstage—those are magic words to us. It's crazy, isn't it? And then, I adore Twyla Tharp's choreography."
>
> I see Twyla cruising for people to videotape, and I give her a sign to talk to the starstruck #98, who's done surprisingly well with her phrase. Twyla interviews her, and later I notice she's out on the floor again with Shelley, having another coaching session. At the run-through that precedes the performance, Twyla pulls #98 into the front row. She looks elegant but not particularly sixties in a lemon-yellow sheer silk Indian tunic and pants. When the ensemble rehearses their eleven seconds, #98 knows instinctively to make a quarter turn so that she won't poke the people next to her when she extends her arms.
>
> In fact, Twyla seems to have designated her as a featured player. She gets to be a finalist in the costume contest, and her interview appears on the edited video.

Tharp seemed disappointed with the Londoners' idea of sixties costumes. At the run-through, she selected finalists for the contest, going down the line with a compliment or a funny remark and a question for each one. A few contestants had actually owned their getups in the sixties, but many borrowed them from their parents or picked them up in thrift shops during the afternoon break. Tharp

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explained to me back in the States that not only did this bring-your-own policy save her the cost of providing costumes for the huge cast, but it might encourage people to talk to their parents about the sixties. "Search your mother's heart is always good," she said.

Using her personal applause meter, Tharp got the Barbican audience to judge whoever was "most visible" in the crowd, and which costume was "most authentic." The "authentic" winner was a feisty, red-haired woman well over senior-discount age, who sported hot pants, a silk top, and platform shoes. The "most visible" young man wore a blue and purple flowered shirt with a choker of orange beads and matching pink bracelet, and sunglasses.

The contest drew attention to individuals in the army of performers, and gave the audience a part to play. It was only one of Tharp's ingenious ploys to bring us nonprofessionals into the action.

The costume contest comes between the long first section of *The One Hundreds* and the explosive last two. Instead of the original, severely didactic, continuous presentation of the phrases, Tharp now brings out one of her dancers, Gabrielle Malone, who will do the phrases sitting in a chair. This will allow the audience and the cast—now seated in chairs on both sides of the stage—to learn the whole sequence. There will be a use even for this: Tharp has planned an "encore," without telling the cast about it, in which she and Shelley and the company dancers will lead the ensemble in as many phrases as it takes to play Jerry Lee Lewis' "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On."

Tharp also plants the idea of competition when, partway through Gaby's hundreds, she brings on Andrew Robinson, who danced with London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Richard Alston, and other English groups before joining Tharp. With slightly malicious glee, Tharp explains that unison dancing encourages the audience to make comparisons, and proceeds to applause-rate Gaby and Andrew as they finish the phrase sequence. The audience roots for their local boy.

She also confides that initially she simply made up movement phrases and had no trouble remembering which came after which. But when she taught them to Rose Marie Wright, Sara Rudner, and subsequent company dancers, she discovered that they had invented mnemonic devices, sometimes based on the movement's resemblance to familiar gestures or objects, so they could keep track of the order. These nicknames stuck, and the Londoners seemed pleased to learn that they were doing The Pregnant Lady or Death in *The Green Table.*

Some London critics fastened on these memory aids as if they were definitions of Tharp's movement. It's easy to pigeonhole Tharp as a pop artist, or an underachieving purveyor of "everyday" movement. It's much harder and more troubling to discover her real relationship to the

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everyday world, to refocus one's critical attitudes and visualize how a serious artist could be making a "fun" event.

A few days after *The One Hundreds*, I participated in a panel about "community dance" at the Royal Festival Hall, sponsored by the Buckingham Regional Dance Council. I cited the Tharp event as a great example of community dance's possibilities. For the audience, it's an entertainment, a reflection of their own community and their cultural past. For the volunteers, a chance to glimpse life backstage and take part in the process of creating a dance performance, and also to do something that demands discipline and practice, however simple the task they're assigned. And for all, including Tharp and the company dancers, a celebratory sense of engagement in an ongoing creation.

After saying this, I turned for confirmation to one of the seven or eight London critics who had danced one of the hundreds, and who was on the panel with me. She hesitated, then admitted that she'd been disappointed. She didn't feel she'd connected with the other volunteers, who she thought were mostly in-groups of Tharp devotees, and even though she practiced her phrase, when she got on stage to perform it, she became disoriented by the mobs around her and couldn't even see the audience, let alone make a showing.

I could see how an individual might feel this way, but it seemed a pretty parochial view of what Tharp had offered. *The One Hundreds* isn't one of the standard gimmicks that choreographers use to make their work more audience-friendly. Tharp didn't just invite people for a backstage peek at a rehearsal, nor was she just offering them the stage for an evening to do their own thing. *The One Hundreds* isn't a master class for people of mixed skills, and it isn't a simulated dance. It's a planned and rehearsed occasion where everyone plays an important part in creating a unique effect.

Community art is one of the buzzwords in dance today. Funding priorities have gradually shifted from choreographic art to more socially useful or politically correct activities. What dancers used to do as a peripheral attraction—classes, workshops, school programs—now is written as a main subject in their grant proposals. Continuing ed or lightweight performance with some ethnic affinities gets lumped into the community art category. So do programs harking back to the sixties, where dancers try to show grade school teachers how to teach dance in order to teach math.

Obviously, community art has terrific potential at a time when we're too dependent on what our TV sets feed us for entertainment. Drumming circles and local pageants are flourishing, but dance seems peculiarly resistant to incorporating what laypersons can do in theatrical ventures of some challenge. Tharp's *One Hundreds* could be a model for making this crossover work.

Well into the afternoon rehearsal, Twyla slides in between me and #98 and shoves a microphone in front of me. "So Marcia, what's the

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difference between the sixties and the nineties?" I mumble that critics aren't supposed to be interviewed but realize I can't escape. "Well, we're older," I say. She's not satisfied, and we fall comfortably into the game of wits we've been playing for twenty years.

"Whaddya mean by that?"

"Well, I mean we've learned some things about how to do what we want to get done."

"Oh yeah? I'm not so sure of that. Maybe you are."

"Did I say I was sure? I meant we've gotten a few more ways to do our thing. . . ."

The conversation continues, and later on pieces of it are included in the edited performance video. I'm pleased, of course. Critics always are when dancers admit them onto the playing field.

After the performance, half the audience stays around, having a drink and waiting for their friends who've danced one of the hundreds. It's like a party, although no party was planned. At least two people are there who danced *The One Hundreds* in other places years ago. Number 98 is there, surrounded by co-workers who've come to the performance. I tell her how well I think she did, and encourage her to take dance classes. She beams with pride.

I get introduced to someone who stares at me for a minute, then exclaims, "You were in the video!" For a moment, I feel like a star.

The One Hundreds *will be performed in New York City at Grand Auditorium, Hunter College, 69th Street and Park Avenue, on February 27, 1999 at 7:00 P.M.*

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BERT CARDULLO

Medium Cool

JUST WHEN I HAD MORBIDLY BEGUN TO BELIEVE that Hollywood would never again produce a significant film, along come *The Truman Show* and *Wag the Dog* to astonish me. Hollywood movies with Hollywood stars, these pictures' appearance cannot be explained except as instances of the triumph of human stubbornness and artistic bent over the dismal state of film production in particular and cultural life in general. One reason for their success is their subgenre, satire, which does not allow for the sentimentality that mars most Hollywood confections, or rather transforms the excessive and unearned emotion of sentiment into the legitimate if exaggerated anger of send-up. Another reason is the object of that satire: probably today's hottest subject, the media and their capacity—with our complicity—for the most lurid voyeurism, on the one hand, and the baldest political manipulation, on the other. In *The Truman Show*, as in satire generally, there is no danger of Hollywood's other formal weakness, melodrama, because the object of scorn—media culture and all those who patronize it—is never really given a human or fleshed-out face.

That face belongs in the movie to Truman Burbank, a thirty-year-old insurance salesman whose entire life, unbeknownst to him, is being watched by 5,000 hidden cameras and is being broadcast on "The Truman Show," a twenty-four-hour-a-day television program that's an international hit. The picture begins on day 10,909 of the show, which is to say that it has been chronicling almost every moment of every day of Truman's life, without commercial interruption, since the moment of his birth. How could this be possible? Well, it is and it isn't, as is always the case in the subversive fantasy known as satire. It's possible in the film, first, because everyone around Truman is an actor, rehearsed and programmed for "The Truman Show." And second, because the program is filmed on a massive, domed Hollywood sound stage designed to look like a good-sized island community (called Seahaven), replete with sun, moon, forest, ocean, cookie-cutter houses, picture-perfect downtown, and sparkingly antiseptic atmosphere.

The Truman Show's illusion is not possible, or is at least inconsistent, in that only some of its shots look as if they come from Seahaven's oddly placed or angled cameras. Many shots of Truman's daily activities, instead, were patently—and implausibly—photographed by an exposed camera from the customary straight angle. A number of takes, naturally, come from overhead cameras planted in Seahaven's dome, and their

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godlike point of view is identified with that of the aptly named Christof, the Orwellian "televisionary" who thought up the idea of televising the story of this genuine everyman. Wearing a beret, wire-rimmed spectacles, and a monastic-looking suit, Christof literally directs "The Truman Show" from on high in his studio. (The Australian Peter Weir directs the film itself, with a script by the New Zealander Andrew Niccol.) His is the very first image we see in the film, commenting at once sinisterly and majesterially on the nature of what we are about to watch, and he is the obvious, satirical link between omniscient, omnipotent divinity and media savvy as well as dominance.

Yes, but how could Truman have remained ignorant, for thirty years, about the filming of his own life for television? It's true that "The Truman Show" is not broadcast on the island of Seahaven, and that therefore he's neither aware of it nor of its merchandising worldwide via Truman bars and fan clubs. It's also true that Truman lives in virtual isolation: he never leaves the island because of hydrophobia dating back to his childhood, and inculcated in him by a staged boating accident in which his ersatz father drowned. (Even Truman's parents are actors; legally orphaned before his birth, he was adopted by a corporation, Christof's television network.) Nonetheless, we're asked to accept as the film's conceit (and I for one did) that suddenly, for the first time in thirty years, Truman Burbank is beginning to suspect that something in his otherwise ideal/idyllic life is terribly amiss. Early on, for example, Truman is puzzled by a theatrical-lighting fixture that falls from the sky onto the road in front of his house. Later, in an unscripted moment on the street, Truman encounters the actor who once posed as his father and who was supposedly lost at sea, trying to force his way back onto the TV program.

Hence, *The Truman Show* draws its suspense from the titular character's gradual realization that his whole life is a television show, and derives its conflict from Christof and company's need both to thwart that realization and to keep Truman from attempting to conquer his fear of water by crossing the Pacific Ocean to take a dream vacation on the Fiji islands. There's also one other, related problem for the television producers: a young woman named Sylvia who, as an actress on "The Truman Show" in the role of Lauren, Truman's high-school sweetheart, tried to warn him that his seemingly wonderful existence was in reality the subject of an ongoing television program. For this indiscretion, Lauren/Sylvia was cut out of the script and banished to Fiji, where she has continued to watch her true love on the tube like everyone else. Truman himself has never forgotten her, however, which is the chief reason he feels compelled to visit Fiji (whose travel brochures, featuring the model Lauren/Sylvia, he has somehow managed to see).

Lauren/Sylvia, like the fans of "The Truman Show," sports a button asking "How's It Going to End?", and, indeed, this question or its subtextual equivalent, "Will He Find Out?", supplies the modicum of

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dramatic tension that the program possesses. For this "Candid Camera" on a grand or expansive scale is too serenely sanitized for the gritty, documentary excitement of, say, "Cops" or even MTV's "Real World"; and "The Truman Show" isn't blessed with enough narrative or climactic shaping to work as soap opera: there's no murder, no robbery, no backstabbing, no adultery, not even a speck of dirt. What peripeteias we do witness, along with viewers around the globe, must be improvised by Christof to create some relief from the cheery, placid, pristine sameness that is Truman Burbank's life.

I'm thinking especially of Truman's surprise escape attempt by night, as Christof indomitably barks "Cue the sun!" in order to facilitate the search for his rebellious main character. Truman boldly sets sail in search of Fiji and a new world—or at any rate a world without the "product placement" that makes "The Truman Show" profitable. In order to stop him, Christof is prepared to kill off his protagonist in a violent storm at sea, but Truman miraculously survives only to run his boat into the painted skin of this domed set's outer wall. Then, in a last-ditch effort to keep Truman in his cell and on the show, Christof goes so far as to give him the following, ominous warning: "There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I've created." In response to which Truman exits through the stage door, to the applause of his many fans (who, as one of them mindlessly puts it, will now just tune in to "whatever else is on") and an imminent rendezvous with the ever-watchful Lauren/Sylvia.

Dramatic highlights like the foregoing are the exception in "The Truman Show," however; the rule in a universe as enamelled and orderly as Truman's is the anti-drama of everyday life. Yet millions raptly watch the program each day, and have done so for years. It is these people (especially Americans) who, in their captivity by television, are the target of *The Truman Show*'s ferocious satire, together with the media moguls like Christof who pander to them. Entrapped or enthralled as this audience is, they will gobble up anything they see on the tube: from media spectacles like the Simpson Bronco chase to something as mind-numbing as a round-the-clock weather channel. The fact that these viewers will also consume a program as vapid and soporific as "The Truman Show" attests to the pathological extent of their addiction. *The Truman Show* exaggerates, to be sure, but only to make its satirical point: that for reasons of boredom, voyeurism, complete surrender of will, or sheer hypnotic addiction, humans will watch almost anything transmitted from the vastness of the great outside to the confines of a small television set inside.

The titular role in this movie is perfectly embodied by Jim Carrey, for his beaming, surface affability as a performer has so often betrayed a dark fury just beneath it—the very kind of fury that rises up in the otherwise jocose Truman as he learns that his entire life is a fabrication. As one might guess, I have never been a fan of Carrey's high-school exhibitionism, his idiotic muggings and cavortings. But in *The Truman*

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Show a restrained version of this idiocy works, up to the point of the hero's self-revelation, because, from birth, Truman has absorbed only the conventions of television from the actors and extras who surround him, as well as from those performers whom he himself watches on TV. That is, he too behaves—and can do nothing but behave—like an idiotic actor for a witless medium, grimacing and posturing as if for a lens even though he doesn't know a lens is actually there.

Carrey's adolescent brightness is helped by Peter Biziou's high-gloss cinematography in combination with Dennis Gassner's squeaky clean production design, which gives the eye nowhere to rest in its jumble of surfaces and presents no recesses or depths to explore. Appropriately, there are also none to explore among the supporting characters of "The Truman Show," all of whom are acted (by actors themselves being played by actors!) in such a coolly savvy or calculatingly sleek way as to defy in-depth analysis or elucidation. Such leading lights as Mozart, Chopin, and Brahms supply a score to counterpoint the mundaneness of much of the movie's action, while Burkhard Dallwitz suitably provides television mood music to underline the emotional climaxes of "The Truman Show."

The songs in *Wag the Dog* are furnished by the likes of Willie Nelson, Huey Lewis, and Maurice Chevalier, and they are so plentiful as to constitute a secondary theme in this picture: the equation of popular music's glib manipulation of the emotions with public servants' glib manipulation of the truth. The main theme, of course, is the equation or conflation of politics and show business, Washington and Hollywood. Not a new idea, to be sure, but in the media-cum-political satire that is *Wag the Dog*, this formulation is newly handled as well as grandly magnified. Like the satire in *The Truman Show*, it had to be if it was going to get our attention, for we live in a cultural climate that makes the creating of any kind of satire difficult. Why? Because satire exaggerates in the hope that its caricature will spur improvement, yet the ironic tone of many of our contemporary culture's artifacts, such as TV's "David Letterman," suggests that nothing really matters—a tone fatal to the satiric impulse, for it removes the possibility of any emotional connection to individual subject matter. Furthermore, because we live in a society marked by excess, today's satire can easily become tomorrow's reality, as we shall see in the case of *Wag the Dog*.

Nonetheless, despite an atmosphere hostile to Washington political satire (inextricably bound up with the media ever since the 1960 presidential campaign), Hollywood has in the course of half a year (1998) released three attempts at it—in addition to *Wag the Dog*, there were *Primary Colors* and *Bulworth*. I'll concentrate on *Wag the Dog* here, for Mike Nichols' *Primary Colors*, about Bill Clinton's 1992 rise to the Presidency, loses its way as it tries to balance satire with melodrama; while Warren Beatty's *Bulworth*, about a campaigning U.S. Senator's political rebirth as a "white Negro" activist, is too self-adoringly sentimental to be self-sacrificially satirical.

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Wag the Dog has a script by David Mamet and an allusive title that is certainly better than the pedestrian one of its purported source, Larry Beinhart's *American Hero* (1993), which Mamet claims never to have read. I believe him, because Beinhart's novel has none of this dramatist-scenarist's brutal, fragmentary, ego-justifying dialogue, nor does it have either the movie's admirable economy or its stinging wit. Barry Levinson directed *Wag the Dog* with uncharacteristic bustle and implacability, so I have to believe that Mamet's incisive screenplay was the tail that wagged this particular dog.

Let's begin with Beinhart's premise in *American Hero*: what if the political strategist Lee Atwater, as he lay dying of cancer in 1991, had conceived a plan whereby George Bush could win reelection in 1992 by producing a war, exactly the way Hollywood produces a movie? What if, in other words, Operation Desert Storm against Iraq had been designed from the start as a cynical, media-friendly piece of Republican propaganda? Mamet and Levinson alter this premise so as to make it portable and futuristic, as opposed to site-specific and retrospective: the President, never named and faceless, is running for reelection, but less than two weeks before Election Day, he is accused of molesting a Girl Scout who was on a visit to the Oval Office; his spin doctor rapidly resolves that only a war—or, as he puts it, "the appearance of a war"—can distract attention from this sex scandal and unite the country behind its leader; then the spinmeister flies to Hollywood to engage a big shot to "produce" the war with so anonymous a state as Albania.

But just how portable and futuristic is *Wag the Dog*'s premise, given the fact that within a week of its release, the United States almost found itself embroiled in a new war with Saddam Hussein at the same time as President Clinton was struggling to answer questions of sexual misconduct with the ex-intern Monica Lewinsky? Did real-life events centering on the White House crowd the headlines and therefore make the film's satire superfluous? Or does *Wag the Dog*'s prescience about the present merely tickle, even as it makes explicit reference to what it calls such staged events of the past as Reagan's invasion of Grenada, Carter's Iranian hostage crisis, and Bush's own Gulf War?

I'd say the latter, owing in part to Dustin Hoffman's sparkingly farcical incarnation of the self-consumed Tinseltown producer Stanley Motss, in part to the extent to which *Wag the Dog*, like *The Truman Show*, excoriates television's power to determine how we think, feel, and act. For the war with Albania is a TV war, a conflict manufactured for the small screen by Hollywood in the person of Motss (a consolidation of three characters in *American Hero*, including a show-business security consultant), who tells us that he began his career in "live television." And, just as Christof can soberly pontificate that "There's nothing fake about Truman," Motss can outrageously opine that what makes the Albanian set piece his best work is its "honesty."

The spin doctor who enlists Motss's Hollywood know-how is named Conrad Brean, and his own identification with the medium of television

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becomes clear in the film's opening sequence. It consists of shots of Brean entering the White House and simultaneously being filmed as he enters by closed-circuit TV monitors. This is a man who, with a straight face, can tell the suspicious CIA, "Of course there's a war: I'm watching it on television." No one like Brean exists in the novel, nor is there anyone in *American Hero* like Winifred Ames, the spineless, opportunistic presidential aide who works in tandem with Brean and Motss to deceive the press, the networks, and the public.

Beinhart, for his part, tends to keep Washington and Hollywood separate after their initial contact through a memo the dying Atwater leaves behind; he also appends chapters of first-person narration in the entertainment capital (from the point of view of the hero, the security consultant) to distinguish its peculiar brand of solipsism from the paradoxically omniscient or know-it-all kind found in the political capital. Brean, Motss, and Ames are virtually inseparable throughout *Wag the Dog*, which visually underscores a point the novel verbally underplays: that politics and show business have become one and the same. As for Hollywood's narcissism in the movie, Motss has so much to go around that we need not listen to his voice-over on top of it.

Taken with the idea of expanding his ego further by producing an otherwise nonexistent war for Washington, Motss gathers together a crew to assist him, including the country singer-songwriter Johnny Dean and a fast-talking idea man known as the "Fad King" (both of them Mamet creations). Their war comes complete with reports of sinister Albanian terrorists crossing the Canadian border carrying a nuclear device in a suitcase, as well as the broadcast of a videotaped, digitally manufactured clip depicting a horrific scene from supposedly besieged Albania. News programs quickly pick up the phony story, the Albanian crisis is voraciously consumed as truth, and, predictably, the Girl-Scout incident disappears from the newspapers, much to the delight of Brean and Ames. Then the CIA, refusing to play ball, suddenly announces the end of the Albanian war, but this doesn't deter Stanley Motss. Absurdly comparing such a setback to the difficulties he has faced while making movies, Motss declares that "This is NOTHING"—a double-edged Mametian verbal tic that he continues to utter as each phase of his fantastic cover-up comes undone.

So Motss and associates go to work to create something out of nothing, or is it nothing out of something? They concoct another twist to keep the Albanian story going as Election Day approaches: if Act I was "The War," Act II becomes "The American Hero Left Behind by the War." Mamet's American hero is given the name William Schumann, and it is reported that he was somehow left behind the lines in Albania. Prodded by such merchandising gimmicks as T-shirts, records, and footwear, the entire country becomes obsessed with the plight of this brave sergeant who has been "cast off like an old shoe."

To use Schumann's rescue and homecoming as a public-relations ploy on behalf of the President, Brean requests an unknown soldier to play

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him, so the man he gets from the Pentagon is as close to unidentifiable or irreclaimable as you can get and still be alive: a psychotic of the paranoid schizophrenic variety, who has been serving twelve years in a military prison on the West Coast for rape. This convict subsequently throws a fit aboard the plane carrying him back to Washington, causing it to crash; but, miraculously, he survives along with Brean, Motss, and Ames, only to be killed on the ground by a rescuer whose daughter he had attempted to violate.

The ever-resourceful Motss quickly thinks to stage an elaborate funeral for Sergeant Schumann, who has now metamorphosed into a fallen hero of the Albanian campaign. This extravagant television spectacle works—works so well, like the overall intrigue of which it is the culmination, that Motss now crazily refuses to remain its anonymous, behind-the-scenes creator. He proudly wants public credit for putting together the scam that saved the President, credit that he says he has been denied in the movie industry, where there's no Oscar for Best Producer. This bronze-tanned, fluffy-haired megalomaniac has finally met his waterloo, however, in his ostensible ally, Conrad Brean.

Played by Robert De Niro as Motss's diametrical opposite, a model of understated intelligence and nearly academic anonymity, Brean warns his partner in deception, as he has previously done, to keep his mouth shut and maintain absolute secrecy about the con they are still in the process of perpetrating. But Motss refuses to listen, and he pays for his ego with his life: Brean quietly has the now complicit CIA rig the producer's murder to appear as a fatal heart attack, after which we get the television news report that U.S. troops will return to Albania to finish the job against its internecine, anti-American insurgents. There is still time, you see, until Election Day.

If the plot of *Wag the Dog*, as I have summarized it above, seems unbelievable, it is, but no more so than that of any farce. And no more so than in an equally subversive fantasy like *The Truman Show*, which has its share of farcical moments. In farce, as many commentators have noted, the improbable is frequently made to seem totally possible by virtue of the breakneck speed at which the single-minded, incident-crowded, decision-demanding action takes place (*Wag the Dog* spans only 97 minutes), and to the degree that the actors make a realistic, grave commitment to the ridiculous, unrealistic action, particularly in so physically realistic a medium as film. The audience itself is in no position or frame of mind to question the plausibility of what it sees, for it's too busy both being amused by behavior it would normally deplore and being avenged, through the superiority of its laughter, on the powerful people who engage in such behavior.

As for the observation on the part of several critics that Anne Heche's portrayal of Winifred Ames is frigid, at the same time that there isn't much chemistry between De Niro and Hoffman, I'd respond that such iciness or remove is the precise point of these characterizations, particularly in a satirical force. And I'd add that this characterological

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quality is underlined by the noted cinematographer Robert Richardson's cool, collected palette of blues and browns. Figures like these three have no time for romance or even friendly connection with another human being: each is wrapped up in his or her own insular world, and each complements blind ambition with Machiavellian rationalization or unself-criticalness.

It's disheartening that attempts have been made to discredit both *Wag the Dog* and *The Truman Show* on the basis of their stars' performances, which in my opinion have been greatly misunderstood, especially Carrey's and De Niro's. It's equally dispiriting that attempts have been made to dismiss each film because of its so-called plot glitches, as if *Wag the Dog* and *The Truman Show* were naturalistic documents begging for veristic authentification. Lastly, each movie has been called fresh but not deep on account of its superficial characterizations, which is (ridiculously) to condemn satire for not being tragedy, or farce for not being psychodrama. Shallowness of characterization is part of the point of *Wag the Dog* and *The Truman Show*, where depth or richness of personality has been implicitly short-circuited by the base culture of television.

Saturated as our culture is by the medium of television, it is not surprising that some of us seem to be missing the message of these two striking pictures. The anesthetic or "cool" medium of TV is its own anodyne message, as Marshall McLuhan infamously insinuated thirty-five years ago. We must therefore look to the select cinema for critical reflection, mental replenishment, and even political revitalization—for a lens not only on the world, in other words, but also on television's reduction of that world.

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RICHARD HORNBY

The Social Problem Play

MODERN DRAMA BEGAN WITH THE SOCIAL PROBLEM PLAY, but the genre has long had a low reputation. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, French playwrights like Augier, Dumas *fils*, and Brieux turned the theatre into a platform for their views on problems like divorce, prostitution, or the power of the church. At a time when the novel was the preeminent literary form, the problem or "thesis" play managed to revive serious interest in the drama, but intellectuals soon turned against it. Since playwrights can stack the deck any way they want, problem plays can easily become glib and cheap. Their successor today is the television message drama, where topical issues—drugs, abortion, gays in the military, sexual harassment—regularly become a two-hour play of the week. (By the time this appears, the Monica Lewinsky affair will no doubt have been made into one.) When a play becomes an editorial or a sermon, it can seem a bit silly even when we agree with its intent. There is nothing wrong with editorials or sermons, but a play, being entirely a fabrication, cannot really make a persuasive case or prove anything. "The poet never affirmeth," Sir Philip Sidney maintained, or, as Samuel Goldwyn put it, "Messages is for the Western Union."

Henrik Ibsen, influenced by the French thesis plays, found his drama tarred by the same brush, which irritated him considerably. In fact, only a few of his many plays center on social problems. Those that do are never mere propaganda pieces, but are full of ironies and ambiguities that quickly undermine any simplistic reaction. Ibsen himself was no joiner or political activist; at a dinner where he was being lauded for his feminism, he confessed that he had no interest in the issue.

An Enemy of the People has the lowest reputation of Ibsen's social plays, which modern concerns about the environment have done nothing to improve. It is popularly supposed to be a simple treatise on the issues of water pollution, government corruption, and free speech: Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist, is medical officer for a spa in a small Norwegian town. When he discovers that the baths are polluted, vested interests in the town, which depends on the spa for its prosperity, not only refuse to clean up the pollution, but muzzle the good doctor when he tries to speak out. He becomes a heroic martyr to scientific truth.

This plot outline is not exactly false, but it omits many crucial details that blend its blacks and whites into more interesting grays. For one thing, Dr. Stockmann's chief antagonist is not only mayor of the town, but his own brother. Dr. Stockmann served for years in a northern

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backwater while his brother prospered at home; when the doctor returned and suggested building the baths, the mayor took over and became Chairman of the Board, relegating his brother to the relatively minor position of medical officer, while ignoring his advice on where to place the intake pipes. Thus Dr. Stockmann's exposure of the pollution is not merely a plea for truth and health, but a blow in a sibling rivalry going back years.

This background rivalry is the reason that the doctor is *happy* when he discovers that the baths are polluted, actually expecting that the town will laud him as a hero. When the reaction turns out to be the opposite, he picks up on an idea that unscrupulous journalists had put into his head, that the pollution is a symbol of government corruption generally, calling for the extermination "like vermin" of all who oppose the truth. Let the town be destroyed, the whole country if necessary! Although he has right on his side, the doctor can be as ruthless as his brother, with an edge of fanaticism that is moderated only by his lack of real power. When the town votes to declare him "enemy of the people," he compares himself more than once to Christ, vowing to find twelve disciples among the urchins of the neighborhood. Only a naive audience member would welcome this quest without reservation. Although *Enemy* certainly qualifies as a social problem play, it is also a fascinating psychological study of a complex protagonist.

Ian McKellen, playing Dr. Stockmann in the Royal National Theatre production of the play, turned the character into one of his greatest roles. McKellen has all the charm and charisma of a major theatre star, but he is not afraid to show the negative side of a character. In fact, he is at his best with ambiguous heroes like Coriolanus, Uncle Vanya, or Salieri in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. He is particularly good at showing defeat, with a hangdog slouch that radiates emotion from his entire body. (The ability to act with the entire body, rather than just the face and voice, is one of the characteristics of a great actor; critics went on forever about Garbo's face, for example, but look at the way she leans against a door, slumps at a table, or walks across a room.)

McKellen showed the unfavorable side of Dr. Stockmann in a number of ways, some of which came from the imaginative staging, by director Trevor Nunn. The scenes between the two brother antagonists, for example, were played with deep rancor, which at one point (not called for in the text) turned into an actual wrestling match. McKellen had a way of baiting people, particularly during the scene in which the entire town censures him for trying to speak out; it was clear that his objective was not truth, but vindication. He was also delightfully vain when Dr. Stockmann solemnly forbids the newspaper people to hold a banquet or parade in his honor, a hilarious moment in a play that is wrongly thought to be humorless. Through the entire performance McKellen showed the boyish charm, the exuberance, the genuine smile, that made it impossible for us not to identify with him. The mayor and his brother may have a lot in common, but where the former is mean and

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underhanded, the latter, as played by McKellen, is open, generous (to a fault, leading to financial problems), and naive.

I saw *Enemy* when it opened in London in the fall of 1997, then again, nearly a year later, when it played in Los Angeles at the Ahmanson Theatre in August. One of the delights in seeing the show twice was in noting how McKellen had grown in his performance. In scoring a role for a stage play, actors tend to think not so much in terms of lines or speeches, but in units, which are defined by the events that occur in them. Thus, in rehearsal you speak of the persuasion unit, the humiliation unit, the reconciliation unit, etc. You are always trying to improve each unit, even after a show opens, since in a role of any size you are rarely happy with every moment of performance. It is like an artist retouching a painting, or a writer revising a manuscript; the main work may have been done successfully, but the totality is never perfect. In ten months of performing in *Enemy,* McKellen enriched many units: In the town meeting, for example, he added some swigs from a hip flask, making Dr. Stockmann slightly drunk as his reactions grew wilder. At another moment, when making Darwinist observations about the evolution of society, he added a hilarious imitation of an ape, while at the end, when comparing himself to Christ, he now assumed a cruciform position. Those who doubt that acting is an art should see how carefully and beautifully a fine actor builds a great role.

The Cider House Rules is a six-hour comedy about abortion. Adapted by Peter Parnell from the John Irving novel, it manages simultaneously to be a poignant social problem play, a brilliantly staged ensemble theatre piece, and very funny entertainment. Developed by the Seattle Repertory Company, the production moved on to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, where I saw it in July. It will continue to tour the country, probably making it to New York sometime next season.

Running from the 1920s to the 1950s, with flashbacks to the 1880s, the play is set in an obstetrical clinic, with connected orphanage, in rural Maine. Dr. Larch delivers babies, then looks after them as orphans; he also performs abortions. Although illegal, the abortions are done fairly openly, with no visible interference from the law, nor complaints from private citizens.

The protagonist of the play is an orphan named Homer Wells. After three attempts to place him with adoptive families end in disaster, he stays on at the home, eventually becoming a capable assistant to Dr. Larch. He also befriends a young apple farmer and his girlfriend, who come to the clinic for an abortion. The farmer goes off to become a pilot in World War II, where he is shot down and presumed dead. Homer and the girl become lovers. Despite Homer's thorough knowledge of contraception, she becomes pregnant and bears his son. When the downed pilot turns up alive but paralyzed, she decides to marry him, passing the child off as an adoptee from the orphanage. The remainder of the play

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deals largely with the complexities of the four-way relationship among the couple, the child, and Homer.

Homer is a passive character, a Candide who functions mainly to set off the personalities of the unusual individuals he runs into. One of these is Melony, a plump, tough tomboy who defends him from bullies and also initiates him in sex; late in the play, she returns to become a goad to his conscience. But the most complex character is Dr. Larch. Flashbacks reveal that he had sexual relations only once in his life, with a prostitute who gave him gonorrhea. His use of ether to relieve the pain of the infection turned him into a lifelong addict. He also became celibate, his sexual drive replaced by a more general desire to help women. When a woman died from a back alley abortion because he declined to perform it himself, he boldly decided never to refuse a woman in need again. This eventually becomes the main point of conflict between him and Homer, who comes to feel, like pro-lifers today, that a fetus is a human being. He refuses to assist Dr. Larch with abortions, though again, in keeping with his passive nature, he will not try to stop them either.

As the play moves toward a conclusion, Homer has given up obstetrics for apple farming, when a young girl, a migrant worker befriended by Homer's then teen-aged son, becomes pregnant—for the second time!—by her father. By then, Dr. Larch is dead, of an ether overdose. Homer finds himself with the same moral dilemma that his mentor/father figure had years before, whether to let the girl die (at her own hands, or those of an illicit abortionist), or to perform the procedure she needs. He not only does it, but, as a result of some earlier chicanery by Dr. Larch with medical records, finds himself actually running the clinic and orphanage as a counterfeit doctor.

The above description sounds grim. The play is pro-choice, but does not pretend that the choice is always easy, or that abortions are the human equivalent of an oil change and lube job. There is even a mimed fetal autopsy. In two ways, however, *Cider House* distances us from both the clinical horrors and the moral agonies, first through its detached, Brechtian style, and second through humor.

Adapter Parnell chose to keep much of the narrative from the novel in the third person, so that actors describe what they are doing while they do it, or report their dialog as if someone else had said it. (Brecht had actors do this, but usually in rehearsal rather than actual performance.) I found the device overused. It works best when there is some strong emotional effect to alienate us from, as when Larch goes into a diatribe against Homer, only to append "Dr. Larch thought to himself," which defuses the moment hilariously. But too often, particularly early in the play before we have a chance to get involved, all the third person stuff is merely annoying.

Nevertheless, with its brisk pace and a generally light touch, as masterfully staged by Tom Hulce and Jane Jones, *Cider House* in performance managed to hold you throughout, never missing an

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opportunity to be funny, however unlikely. In one scene, Dr. Larch and his two nurses (all three of whom are celibate!) read to the audience from an instruction pamphlet about how properly to use a condom. As the nurses announced the four common mistakes, the good doctor glared at us accusingly, seeking the miscreant who leaves his penis in the vagina too long, finally pointing to a hapless fellow in the sixth row. It was a hilarious satire of the hygiene lectures of World War II, when the GIs suddenly found their most intimate activities subjected to clinical diatribe.

It is impossible to praise the cast of this stunning production too highly. Michael Winter was so convincing as Dr. Larch that I wanted to ask if he was taking on any new patients. Josh Hamilton was charming as Homer, while Jillian Armenante was stunning as Melony. The actress was not afraid to make herself look tough and plain, yet she also had an underlying tenderness and humor. Also, she was particularly good in suggesting the changes in the character as she ages. The rest of the large cast, most of whom played a number of roles, included not a single weak actor.

The play does have its script flaws. It could stand cutting, especially in the redundant narrative (e.g., lines like "He saw something on the ground" merely reinforcing the observable action). I could never fathom whether the aviator figured out what his wife had been doing while he was missing in action, nor why his friend Homer was not drafted into World War II himself. But *The Cider House Rules* has vivid characters, potent social satire, genuine moral dilemmas, and boundless, humane comedy.

Michael Frayn's new play, *Copenhagen*, revives the perennial twentieth-century problem of the moral responsibility of scientists. Werner Heisenberg (1901–76) remains the most enigmatic of the great nuclear physicists. When other scientists fled Nazi Germany in the thirties, he stayed behind. Unlike most of them, he was not Jewish; also, since he was relatively young, their exodus provided him with opportunity for advancement. Although initially denounced as a "white Jew" teaching "Jewish science," he was eventually put in charge of the German atomic energy program. Nevertheless, although our own Manhattan Project was begun out of fear of Germany's atomic potential, Heisenberg's project turned out to be a flop. This was probably because Germany lacked the enormous resources required to build the bomb, but the question still remains whether Heisenberg, consciously or unconsciously, sabotaged the effort.

The Heisenberg enigma is epitomized by a visit he made to Copenhagen early in the war, to see his old mentor Niels Bohr. Denmark by this time (1941) was under German occupation, and Bohr, part Jewish, was in serious danger. (Along with other Danish Jews, in a magnificent undercover operation, he later escaped to Sweden, eventually ending up at Los Alamos.) Why did Heisenberg go to Copenhagen? What hap-

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pened at the meeting? All we know is that the two men were at first cordial, but after a walk in the autumn twilight (taken to avoid surveillance microphones), they appeared estranged; Bohr's wife Margrethe was especially angry. Did their conversation center on Heisenberg's apparent collaboration in the German war effort? On atomic fission?

Frayn's play consists of an imaginary conversation among Heisenberg, Bohr, and Bohr's wife after all three are dead. The fanciful circumstances allow them to replay the Copenhagen meeting numerous times, hypothesizing the many arguments that might have occurred. Much of the dialog is drawn from the participants' actual words, written after the war. Heisenberg's memoirs are especially interesting, since the problems with his shoestring atomic operation were considerable, and his actual wartime adventures were shocking. Trying near the end of the war to get home to his family on a bicycle, for example, he was nearly shot by the SS as an army deserter.

Frayn's Heisenberg defends himself on many grounds: He was born, raised, and educated in Germany, had all his friends and family there, could feel at home nowhere else. Having experienced the humiliating defeat imposed on his homeland by the allies after World War I, he could not let it happen again. Most important, as head of the atomic program, he could control it; he vainly hoped that he might contact the heads of the Allies' atomic program, getting them to declare a mutual moratorium with him. (This last is especially ironic, because after the Manhattan Project was a success, its scientists found that their political influence on the use of the bomb was nil.) But in the end, nobody knows why he did what he did. All explanations, including his own, are rationalizations after the fact.

The characters compare the indeterminacy of Heisenberg's motives to his famous Uncertainty Principle, which maintains that it is impossible to determine the position and the momentum of a particle simultaneously. I am always dubious about efforts to draw ethical significance from modern physics, e.g., "Einstein's Theory of Relativity means that everything is relative," which it certainly does not. Yet the Uncertainty Principle does have some value as a metaphor here. The difficulty in measuring both the momentum and position of a particle arises from the fact that in order to take a measurement, you have to hit the particle with some form of energy (say, a photon of light), which will itself disturb the particle's position and/or momentum. The very act of measuring alters the result of the measurement. In the play, Heisenberg is shown to have a complex of reasons for working for the Nazis, and for visiting Copenhagen in 1941: A desire to protect his homeland, a desire to show off in front of his old mentor, a desire to talk physics with a big-leaguer (all the other top physicists having left Germany), a desire to keep the bomb project out of politicians' control, plus a predilection to be shocking and outrageous, as he had been with his Uncertainty Principle. Why Heisenberg behaved as he did is a function of the kind

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of question you ask; thus, the act of measuring again affects the results. Ultimately, *Copenhagen* is about an enigma. As with *An Enemy of the People*, it is a social problem play that works through the ambiguity of its central figure. It is successful not because it provides answers to a social problem, but because it raises fascinating questions.

Copenhagen played to capacity audiences last summer in the intimate Cottesloe Theatre of the Royal National Theatre in London. Bohr and Heisenberg were portrayed superbly by David Burke and Matthew Marsh, both of whom looked surprisingly like their real-life models. Forty years ago, as an undergraduate, I heard Niels Bohr give a series of lectures at M.I.T. Although Burke mercifully lacked the heavy Danish accent, he replicated the rounded shoulders, the potbelly, and the ponderous manner. Bohr was genius in slow motion. Marsh, by contrast, showed Heisenberg as mercurial, witty, vain, and charming. Although the dialog in *Copenhagen* at times bogs down in too many names and scientific details (partly the result of being drawn from the participants' own memoirs), the contrasting character types and the fascinating interplay of ideas make it a discussion piece worthy of Shaw.

Sara Kestelman, an outstanding actress who often seems underused, played the thankless role of Margrethe Bohr. The script does give her a few good speeches, but most of the time the character is merely a referee. Michael Blakemore directed, using a bare, central setting by Peter J. Davison that came to feel like a boxing ring. Frayn is a playwright best known for his farces (especially *Noises Off*), but here he and his cohorts created powerful conflict.

In its third season, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London has finally included two major plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*. While the company was prudent to start with less demanding works, ultimately the test of the historically reconstructed theatre will be in the Shakespearean masterpieces that are at the center of our culture. Certainly these two comedies are among Shakespeare's finest works.

The original Globe was built by and for Richard Burbage, as important in the history of acting as Shakespeare is in playwriting. Even before the present reconstruction was complete, I felt that this was a theatre demanding star acting on a heroic scale. The large size of both stage and auditorium, the opulent decoration, and the extraordinary rapport between audience and performer, require magnetism, energy, dominance. You would not go into St. Peter's Basilica expecting to see the Pope wander in wearing a T-shirt, to mumble his way through the mass. Some performance spaces call for more than naturalism.

As You Like It and *Merchant* are comedies, of course, so perhaps I am out of line in calling for heroic acting. Nevertheless, Shylock is one of Shakespeare's greatest creations, a comic villain who borders on tragic hero. When Charles Macklin played him in the eighteenth century, his performance was so terrifying that it gave George II nightmares; the King jokingly suggested to Walpole that he send recalcitrant Mem-

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bers of Parliament to the play, as a means of scaring them into line. In the following century, Edmund Kean gave the role a poignant humanity that was in its own way equally disturbing. In the Globe production, however, Norbert Kentrup was about as shocking as a college professor giving a lecture for the hundredth time. His lifelessness was aggravated by his heavy German accent, which made him sound appropriately alien in the world of Renaissance Venice, but which also made him hard to understand, even though I practically know the role by heart. The Globe's Artistic Director, Mark Rylance, a young Englishman who lived for some years in the U.S., has gone out of his way to stress the international importance of Shakespeare. *Merchant*, directed by Richard Olivier, who did so well last year with *Henry V*, had a cast that included a Swiss, an Italian, a Nigerian, an English-born Chinese, plus the German Kentrup. Rather than such token representation, I would have preferred actors of world-class talent, whatever their nationalities.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Fiction Rules

SOME MONTHS BACK THERE APPEARED IN THE *NEW YORK OBSERVER*, always eager to dispense literary and cultural gossip, a page headed "Twilight of the Phallocrats," featuring twin pieces by the novelist David Foster Wallace and the critic Sven Birkerts. The pieces suggested, in no very polite terms, that it was time for the over-sixty-five crowd of American male novelists to move over and make room for their successors. Wallace, a smart-aleck young man who writes 1000-page novels full of far-out happenings, took the occasion to abuse Updike's recent *Toward the End of Time*. He allowed merit to some of Updike's earlier books, but—along with various female friends of his—he deplored the sexism and narcissism presumably characteristic of the novelist. Birkerts, more temperately but no less firmly, regretted the angry lashings-out these aging narcissists—Bellow, Mailer, Roth, Updike—had been indulging in recently. Though he was grateful for all they had given us, Birkerts suggested it was time for them either to "bestir themselves" or gracefully yield the fictional laurels to younger contemporaries (he names Robert Stone, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and John Edgar Wideman) who were looking at "the larger world" by way of, so Birkerts claimed, assessing the twin claims of politics and the spirit. As an aging narcissist who has much admired the work of the over-sixty-five crowd of novelists, I instinctively took their side, while noting that Stone, DeLillo, and Pynchon were themselves all past sixty. (I also wondered where, in their work, one found political wisdom rather than fantastic, creative fantasies.) Yet reading in this batch of recent fiction, it seemed that a case could be made for narcissism (though I won't try to make it here) not as an aberrant feature of certain over-the-hill American fictionists, but as a major impulse out of which work (cf. Proust) gets written.

We begin with two excellent novels whose heroes rank high on the narcissism scale.[1] David Gates has been for many years a lively book and music reviewer for *Newsweek* and has published one previous novel, *Jernigan* (1991), a first-person tale of disaster by an unrepentant alcoholic whose last name he uses as a club with which to beat up others and himself. *Preston Falls* is its even better and truly scarifying successor, which widens a third-person-present-tense narrative by focusing not only on the darkly mischievous, self-destructive mind of Doug Willis (known

[1] PRESTON FALLS, by *David Gates*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. $25.00. THIS TIME LAST YEAR, by *Douglas Hobbie*. Henry Holt and Co., Inc. $23.00.

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to himself always as "Willis") but also on his wife Jean and their two unhappy children. The Willises' marriage is in trouble, close to on the rocks, and Willis, a publicity director for a New York City sports beverage concern (a job he despises), decides to take two months' leave, his idea being to repair to the country (Preston Falls). There he owns a fairly primitive house whose main virtue is that it's four hours north of Westchester County where the Willises live. Jean and the children will accompany him, driving up on Labor Day weekend, returning so that the kids can go to school and she to her job as a graphic designer. Willis will remain upcountry, working on the house, reading, playing his guitar (he owns a number of them) and generally thinking things out. What happens—as to be expected in the world of Gates's fiction—is disaster: bad fight between mom and dad; rapid descent into drink and drugs by Willis after his family leaves; difficulty with the law and eventual flight by Willis, though not back to the nest in Westchester.

The verbal energy page by page is what makes this painful novel such a pleasure to read, as in its opening when we're introduced to Willis and his truck, allusion to which is his way of convincing the boys at the office that he's "a badass outlaw":

> And five mornings a week it's his fuck-you to the Volvos in the commuter lot at the Chesterton station. A '77 Dodge V-8, with mustardy-yellow-paint flaking off to show the original dark green, patches of gray Bondo on fenders and rocker panels, and—this is the best thing—a black driver's side door that must've come off a whole different model, because the chrome doesn't line up.

Willis is proud that for $1500 he's gotten himself "the hillbilly shitheap par excellence, complete with old truck smell, but actually semi-reliable." Like Jernigan's, Willis' reigning spirit is irony, plenty of it self-reflexive; he's also a reader, of Sherlock Holmes, Wodehouse, above all Dickens. At one point he stops at a used bookstore in the Preston Falls vicinity "hoping he might find *Barnaby Rudge*, the only one he's missing, and which is probably a piece of shit; but if you're doing a Dickens thing, you might as well do a fucking Dickens thing." Failing to find the novel, he looks for William Burroughs' *Junkie* but instead turns up an old copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*:

> He flips through the yellow-bound pages and finds an illustration captioned "Atheist": a feather-hatted fop beckoning someone to follow, unaware he's at the edge of an abyss (you see a bird flying in the distance) and about to put his slender walking stick down into empty air. Willis doesn't remember Atheist but assumes he must be a fucking atheist. What's great about *Pilgrim's Progress* is, everything's just exactly what it is.

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Good literary criticism, along with its vigorous vernacular and echo of J.D. Salinger. The wife, Jean's, narrative is a shade more conventional in its writing but equally gripping. *Preston Falls*, with comparable energy on almost every page, is funny, sharp, and downright unpleasant, so don't miss it.

As a novelist Douglas Hobbie has been praised, but not enough. His earlier fictions, *Boomfell* and *The Day* were notable, especially the second, for painstaking though never labored realism and for the bite of wit with which conversation, both internal and with others, was rendered. Notable also was an overall grim sense of things and (as with Gates) a fairly unillusioned view of the marital relationship. Hobbie's third book, *Being Brett*, was a rending account of the death of his daughter—an impossible subject, one might think, but Hobbie dared it. In *This Time Last Year*, the husband, Henry Ash, haunted by his daughter's death, decides to hole up (again, like Gates's Willis) in his sister-in-law's southern Vermont farmhouse, to recuperate and begin the writing of an ambitious book on the American genius triumvirate of Melville-Whitman-Dickinson. Concurrently his wife is touring England with an old friend, and the narrative moves between Henry in Vermont and Elizabeth in England.

This is Hobbie's most strongly felt and structurally ambitious narrative, consisting of eight sections in some of which other characters—like Fitz, the recently dead husband of his sister-in-law, or Helen (a friend of Fitz who was in love with him), or finally, and in a quite unexpected turn, Henry's son—take on individuality and substance. It's a fully imagined world, presented in a prose that, unlike Gates's, doesn't constantly throw up fireworks. Its center is the first-person Henry narrative as he struggles to begin his "project," discovers, on Fitz's computer, a document composed just before the man died of a heart attack, mainly about his relation with the Helen whom Henry has just met. Henry moves around the lonely house, excited or depressed, has his Scotch before cooking himself healthful meals (pasta and salad), spends time staring at the red light on the answering machine of his phone that signals someone has called. As the phone continues not to ring, he thinks of his dead daughter and the number and variety of phone calls—of momentary celebration or desolating sadness—they had, and he realizes he will never again hear her voice—"Hi, Dad, it's me":

> The light on the answering machine in Mary's country house, the unblinking red light, simply meant no messages, but then it got mixed up with my daughter one night during a thunderstorm after too much red wine. . . . For the moment the unblinking red light seemed another painfully literal sign of my daughter's absolute ever-after absence. Thunder tumbled and rolled to the west, followed by lightning that made the dark green outdoors flash against the multipaned window like a looming intruder's vast face.

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He rehearses other voices that will never turn up on this answering machine, like his father's, or the previous husbands (both dead) of his sister-in-law: "Rain drummed on the small house like something willful. I poured another Scotch and raised my glass to the weather, my big boisterous companion for the night." At which point, the phone rings, introducing Helen and propelling the narrative into new eventfulness. *This Time Last Year* is a dense and densely satisfying book, even if Henry's wife's travel in England reads a little too close, at times, to travelogue. It's also a death-haunted book that nevertheless makes one feel in the midst of life, and it's Douglas Hobbie's best so far.

Two first novels deserve attending to.[2] Martha Cooley's is an intelligent effort to bring a lot together, and told in brief summary it may sound improbably forced and willed. The archivist of the title is Matthias Lane, a man in his sixties who for some decades has been in charge of a prestigious university's collection of manuscripts, most notably—for purposes of the tale he is to tell—the letters of T.S. Eliot to Emily Hale, not to be opened until 2020. (Emily Hale had refused Eliot's instructions to destroy the letters and instead deposited them for posterity's sake.) Matthias assumed curatorship of the library's Mason Room in 1965, the year his wife, Judith, died after having been hospitalized for some years in a mental institution. (T.S. Eliot also died in 1965.) Into the Mason Room one day comes a young woman named Roberta Spire who is determined to read the Eliot letters and urges the archivist to permit her access to them. Roberta's presence triggers memories of Matthias' marriage, of his wife's growing obsession with her Jewish heritage, as well as her aspirations as a poet; these memories fuse with thoughts of Eliot's unhappy first marriage and his wife, Vivienne's, madness, eventual institutionalization, and death. The novel's artfully woven pattern makes surprisingly imaginative use of lines and images from Eliot's poetry, the sort of thing that sounds gimmicky but in fact makes you more interested not just in the novel but in Eliot's life and poems as well. The book's second part takes us back to the journal the archivist's wife Judith kept between 1959, when she was hospitalized, and her death; Judith's consciousness is increasingly dominated by Holocaust events of which she has become a sort of archivist. (She is haunted as well by visions of the jazz pianist Bud Powell, who was also mad, and the poems of LeRoi Jones.) In the final section Lane resolves things with Roberta Spire by dealing, in a surprising plot twist, with the letters Eliot wrote Hale. It's not a book from which you want to quote sparkling sentences, but the writing is quietly authoritative throughout, even if the journal section sags a bit, and it establishes Martha Cooley as a writer worth following.

Parts of Daniel Menaker's novel (he has published two collections of stories) appeared in *The New Yorker* where Menaker was a Senior Editor

[2] THE ARCHIVIST, by *Martha Cooley*. Little, Brown and Co., Inc. $22.95. THE TREATMENT, by *Daniel Menaker*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. $23.00.

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for twenty years. He feels like a veteran, and his book has the smell of experience about it. Certainly the most vivid experience in *The Treatment* is the extended analysis its protagonist, a private school English teacher named Jake Singer, undergoes at the hands of Dr. Morales, an over-the-top Cuban Freudian whom the jacket blurb correctly calls the "therapist from hell." Morales talks to his patient like this: "You have now succeeded in filling up fifteen of the thirty-five minutes available with dramaturgical exercises, procedural pettiness, philosophical speculation, an attempt to join the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and form a partnership with me, and condescension to the tedium of my practice." Jake, noting that the doctor has yawned twice, says sympathetically that he's struck by how boring some aspects of an analyst's work must be:

> A long silence ensued.
>
> "You are kind to think of my working conditions, even when your thoughtfulness is diluted by the guesswork that precedes it," Dr. Morales said. "Perhaps you would like to vary my routine for me by going outside and taking a walk in the snow in the park?"
>
> "Well, you have been yawning and rearranging your papers back there."
>
> "I must congratulate you. You have graduated from being my partner to being my analyst. Shall we go?"
>
> "You're serious?"
>
> "There are no jokes, Mr. Singer."

Maybe not, but there is a lot of first-rate comedy in this novel, much of it on the nasty edge. Jake Singer's reflections on his job, the woman he falls in love with, his father, and New York urban life in general, are handled with professional ease and zest. But it's the therapist from hell—from whom Jake eventually makes his escape—that gives the book its unique tone and life. It's a tall tale made credible as well (even as you can't quite believe it) by the thorough attractiveness of the first-person narrator who is, among other things, endlessly inventive in the malapropisms he elicits from the therapist: "Mr. Singer, I suspect and fear that you are about to open this gifted horse's mouth and inspect its teeth, is it not?" I'd be willing to sign on for analysis if I could find a doctor who talked that way.

The really veteran novelist from this quarter's pack turns out to be Alison Lurie, whose first book, *Love and Friendship*, was published almost forty years ago.[3] *Love and Friendship* was a sharply-tongued satire at the expense of a small New England college named Convers (read Amherst) and devoted much of its vigorous energies to seeing through and showing up male pretensions, energies that also animated her liveliest

[3] THE LAST RESORT, by *Alison Lurie*. Henry Holt and Co., Inc. $22.00.

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and most "wicked" novel, *The War Between the Tates. The Last Resort* is nominally satirical, inasmuch as its protagonist, an aging writer of nature books named Wilkie Walker, is convinced he has terminal cancer and determines to do away with himself by drowning in the waters off Key West, where he and his wife Jenny spend half the year. And in fact Wilkie's successive failed attempts at making an end to himself, and the portrayal of his self-absorbed, yea narcissistic, sensibility, is the strongest part of the novel. Various types turn up or are already inhabiting the Key West milieu Lurie renders with facility and relish; indeed her prose is so effortlessly clear and accessible you're hardly aware that it's a novel you're reading, instead of just life observed. Yet with age Lurie has decided, I think, that to understand all is to forgive all, and she is much more "understanding" than I remember her being in any previous book. Doubtless this is humanly admirable and appropriate to elderly perspectives, but it took most of the bite the novel might have had and turned it into a sweeter taste, bittersweet. This is most evident in the love affair that blossoms between the neglected Jenny and Lee Weiss, a lesbian who runs a boarding house and who falls for Jenny. It's hard to detect anything beyond sympathetic affirmation in Lee's thoughts about her newfound love: "Sometimes, remembering her cool, soft voice, her cool, soft skin, and the sudden warmth of her last kiss, she smiled." This is not the tonic Alison Lurie we're used to, but seems rather to emanate from a satirist yearning for Something More and giving it an imagining in her pages.

I have it on reliable authority that Louis Begley, whose Holocaust memoir *Wartime Lies* (1991) won much acclaim, was graduated as one of the two *summa* degrees in the Harvard College class of 1954, the other being John Updike.[4] For decades Begley contented himself with being a New York City lawyer, then in this decade has come forth with a series of books, among which his last one, *About Schmidt* (1996), is an especially compelling and witty piece of novel-making. The new one, *Mistler's Exit*, is only a shade less good, which puts it well beyond the reach of most practitioners. Head of a highly successful advertising agency, Thomas Mistler discovers in his sixties that he has liver cancer and, disdaining treatment, decides to give himself a last holiday in Venice: "Preposterously, unmistakably, he begins to rejoice. The horizon would no longer recede. The space and time left to him were defined; he had been set free." That buoyancy of course doesn't last, as Mistler's sexual adventures—an affair with a young woman (as in *About Schmidt*) and a final meeting with a former beloved—serve to take him deeper into life, with its memories, guilts, exhilarations. A review of *About Schmidt* noted that Begley sounds like Louis Auchincloss with kid gloves exchanged for brass knuckles, an inelegant observation, but one that brings out the toughness of Begley's own sensibility as well as that of his male

[4] MISTLER'S EXIT, by *Louis Begley*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. $22.00.

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protagonists. The new novel is especially strong in its treatment of sex, as experienced and remembered through a man in his seventh decade. The narrative tone is cool, unsparing, with very little rhetorical variation page by page, and this cool detachment is increased by Begley's principled abandoning of quotation marks to signal narrative speech (Joyce's *Ulysses* is the precursor here). As one who has always thought *Death in Venice* a greatly overrated "masterpiece," I found Begley's take on the situation wholly refreshing and original. In no way is it a reassuring book to read, and it adds strongly to the surprising achievement of this young/old writer who has come so late upon the fictional scene.

Two collections of stories, most of them already published in book form, by women of reputation: Ann Beattie and Bobbie Ann Mason.[5] It is customary to lump them together as central instances, along with Raymond Carver, of "minimalist" fiction, a genre whose products, appearing in the late 1970s and beyond, employed what a recent critic of them calls "a cool, mean style" appropriate to depict characters "to whom life just 'happens.' "[6] Carver aside, I found, rereading these stories and looking at the new ones with which Beattie begins her collection, that the two women, whatever superficial stylistic tendencies they share, are very different writerly sensibilities, and that Mason's has worn much better than Beattie's. The reason is, it could be, that Mason has the advantage in reality. Beattie's "educated," economically stable (more or less) white collar men and women, usually heterosexual, usually divorced and confused, truly possess, in Wyndham Lewis' words (from *Men Without Art*) about Hemingway's heroes, "this capacity for being *the person that things are done to.*" Mason's characters are in the same boat, but she allows one of them occasionally to formulate her plight, as does the heroine of "Memphis," the final story in this selection: "Beverly felt so many people were like Joe [her ex-husband]—half conscious, being pulled along by thoughtless impulses and notions, as if their lives were no more than a load of freight hurling along on the interstate."

Beattie's characters exist for her to put them in impossible situations from which they can spin out Beattie-observations about the televisual culture. "Park City," the title and longest story in the collection, shows that over time she has become more voluble, less terse and deadpan, but things haven't changed that much when the story's heroine speaks of a "real babysitter" as "the sort who phone their boyfriends constantly on their cellular phones and watch TV shows about daughters who pray for the salvation of their mothers who are addicted to body piercing, or priests who battle bulimia." Clever, yes, but that's all, and it goes on and on. Mason's characters watch a lot of TV too and get confused about

[5] PARK SLOPE: New and Selected Stories, by *Ann Beattie.* Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. $25.00. MIDNIGHT MAGIC: Selected Stories, by *Bobbie Ann Mason.* Ecco Press. $25.00.

[6] Philip Simmons, *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture and History in Postmodern American Fiction* (Athens, Georgia, 1977).

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what they've heard there and what they "really" feel about things. But their relative range and depth of reference is a lot more appealing; on the comic level you get to hear about delectable foodstuffs you may never have tried in New England but that down in western Kentucky they're right proud of—like sweet potato balls with marshmallow centers, rolled in crushed cornflakes; or (my special favorite) popcorn cake. At the level of depth, here is a man about to turn eighty-four; his wife has died and he reflects on her death and where it has left him:

> She had died at three-thirty in the morning, and toward the end she didn't want anything—no food, no talk, no news, nothing soft. No kittens to hold, no memories. He stayed up with her in case she needed him, but she went without needing him at all. And now he didn't need her. In the dim light of the street lamp, he surveyed the small room where he had chosen to sleep—the single bed, the bare walls, his jeans hanging up on a nail, his shoes on a shelf, the old washstand that had belonged to his grandmother, the little rag rug beside the bed. He was happy.

These things are as real as the potato balls and popcorn cake, *things* in Mason's imagined world that she takes seriously, as she takes the old man in this passage. I'm convinced she's both a more humorous and a more serious writer than Beattie. Her style may be cool, but it's not always mean, as demonstrated in her fine short novel *Spence + Lila* or in the just-quoted sentences about the old man. This is what I mean by saying that she has, over Beattie, the advantage in reality, at which point a categorizing term like "minimalist" may be dispensed with.

Robert Stone's sixth novel is, shall we say, maximalist, and as one who had admired his work a number of times in print, I may be permitted to take a pass on *Damascus Gate*.[7] This is a book where, on page 477 (twenty pages before the end), two Israeli Mossad operators are introduced, and we hear about how they had been fighter pilots, how one of them had been forced to resign from the Cabinet, "but they had not been able to ditch Shaviv, a permanent undersecretary and Avram Lind's wing man in the Yom Kippur War." Just in case you're interested, at this late date. I could not follow this novel, with its vast cast of characters and geographical spread (maps of Jerusalem and of Northern and Central Israel help some but not enough). Chapters routinely begin with "One evening" or "One summer morning" or "One morning at her apartment"—the looseness of temporal specification seems of a piece with the sense that this is a novel from which virtually nothing was cut. It has the usual great Stone one-liners: "No question, he thought [Chris Lucas, the Stone hero of the book], ontology went better with a drink, which was probably why so many clergy had a problem." My problem with

[7] DAMASCUS GATE, by *Robert Stone*. Houghton Mifflin Co. $25.00.

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Damascus Gate may not be a shared one—consult the back jacket for what Annie Dillard, Tobias Wolff, Frank Conroy, A. Alvarez, Ward Just, and Michael Herr have to say in praise of it. Maybe I should take a trip to Jerusalem. Or maybe pick up again Stone's *Outerbridge Reach.*

I have spent much pleasurable time in the past few months reading the work of the amazing A.N. (Andrew) Wilson, England's successor in the Waugh-Powell-Amis-Iris Murdoch line of master satirists.[8] Not yet fifty, Wilson has published sixteen novels, a spate of journalism (he is a shrewd observer of the Royal Family), and five highly readable biographies—of Milton, Scott, Hilaire Belloc, Tolstoy, and (this one especially good) C.S. Lewis. His early novels, some of them hard to come by, are full of sex and religion—he is himself a lapsed Christian, and recent books on Jesus and Paul show the depths of his residual interest—and a fair amount of nasty fun, always geared to specific places on the map of England. *Who Was Oswald Fish?*, *Scandal*, and *Love Unknown* are perhaps the best of this group, a more recent specimen of which is *The Rector's Wife.* Latterly Wilson has occupied himself with a five-volume sequence, *The Lampitt Papers*, a historical and familial chronicle in the mode, though not stylistically, of Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time.* Wilson is said to be writing the authorized biography of Dame Iris; and if so, he is perfect for the job, with much of Murdoch's interest in religious and philosophical issues, in bizarre sexual entanglements, in amazing plot reversals, in Oxbridge eccentricities. He is also a master of current English slang, and his novels are shorter, more compact, and I should say more amusing than Murdoch's, at least her long, labored, later ones.

His new novel is "about" pedophilia, and that word should also be placed in quotes since it is subject to the protagonists's, Oliver Gold's, speculative analysis, even as it is the condition of his sexual life. Oliver is a philosopher, author of several admired books, also a much sought-after "media don." At forty-five, on the burnt-out side, he convinces himself after a summer's rereading of Hegel that he will never be Truly Great; that conditions in the later twentieth century are unpropitious to the moral and philosophical and religious debate that went on a century before, when the Young Hegelians, Ruskin, Tolstoy, and many others flourished. So Oliver has moved to London and taken up residence in a large house in Muswell Hill occupied by four women: Janet Rose; her divorced daughter Michal O'Hara; Michal's daughter Roberta ("Bobs"); and Oliver's beloved student Catherine Cuffe, who is Michal's lover and who suggested the arrangement.

The novel opens with "Bobs" (the "knowing little sprog," as Cuffe refers to her), announcing to the three adults that Oliver is getting married, thus throwing the women, each in love with him in different ways, into consternation. Only Bobs seems untroubled by the news, though this is hardly the case. The consequences of Oliver's engage-

[8] DREAM CHILDREN, by *A.N. Wilson.* W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. $23.95.

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ment to a mousy American ceramist, Celia Baynes (a "sweetly flat-chested tinikins"), are beautifully developed in a sparely-told, spectacularly engineered plot whose details I will forego expounding. What makes *Dream Children* something more than brittle "satire" or sensationalistic exploitation of the forbidden subject, is its long thirty-page fifth chapter (the book has eighteen chapters, 221 pages), in which Oliver's intellectual, emotional, and sexual life is traced, in a manner both highly intelligent and sympathetic. (For example, Wilson describes Oliver's summer rereading of Hegel in a particular and wholly believable way, full of the most nuanced distinctions and particularities.) The only thing you want to do after finishing *Dream Children* is read it again. A.N. Wilson is a wonder.

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ALEXANDRA MULLEN

Childland and After

> Once upon a time, so long ago that I have quite forgotten the date, there lived a king and queen who had no children.
>
> And the king said to himself, "All the queens of my acquaintance have children, some three, some seven, and some as many as twelve; and my queen has not one. I feel ill-used." So he made up his mind to be cross with his wife about it. . . .
>
> "Why don't you have any daughters, at least?" said he. "I don't say *sons*; that might be too much to expect." . . .
>
> The king tried to have patience, but he succeeded very badly. It was more than he deserved therefore, when, at last, the queen gave him a daughter—as lovely a little princess as ever cried.
>
> —George MacDonald, "The Light Princess" (1862)

FOR THOSE OF US WHO HAVE READ A LOT OF FAIRY TALES, some problems are perennial: childlessness, being a third son, having an evil stepmother, meeting talking cats or officious beggars who turn out to have surprising gifts in store, coping with giants and dragons, or forgetting to invite the wrong fairy to the all-important christening (our impatient king is about to fall into this last error). Familiarity does not necessarily breed boredom, however. As with all stories that are still close to an oral tradition, the teller's treatment of these formulae can vary to please each audience, or even several audiences simultaneously. My epigraph from George MacDonald is a nice example of how both the listening child and the reading grown-up can be entertained. Such pleasures can contain seeds of instruction, too. For when, at the baptismal font, this lovely little princess is cursed—by being deprived of her gravity—the situation at first seems charming and funny: she gurgles and chortles all day; she floats through the air and has to be pulled down with the fire tongs. After all, isn't it a good thing to be lighthearted? But the more intelligent queen anticipates the dangers of being light-headed and light-minded. Indeed, we soon learn that what seemed to be MacDonald's throwaway joke—"as lovely a little princess as ever cried"—hides a profound truth. True loveliness and, even more, the ability to love truly depend on appropriately feeling the gravity of a situation; when a prince is about to sacrifice his life for you, for instance, laughter is an inhuman response. In the story, just as the princess learns the pleasures of gravity for the first time—being able to make a splash in the world and falling in love—so we too learn or are reminded of the almost

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magical qualities in our ordinary human condition. MacDonald's story teaches the importance and pleasures of due gravity without having to forfeit the pleasures of levity.

U.C. Knoepflmacher, a distinguished professor of Victorian literature at Princeton, has published a substantial book on what is usually considered light, even ephemeral, literature: the children's story. In *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity*, Knoepflmacher weighs in with serious claims for certain Victorian practitioners of the form, but he wears his considerable learning lightly.[1] Knoepflmacher examines diverse writings for children beginning in 1841 with John Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* (not published until 1850) and ending with Juliana Horatia Ewing's "Amelia and the Dwarves" in 1870. In between, he offers a connected series of readings of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Rose and the Ring*, George MacDonald's "Light Princess" and *At the Back of the North Wind*, Lewis Carroll's Alice books, Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy*, and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," *Sing-Song*, and *Speaking Likenesses*. That this list neatly and chronologically divides into books by men and books by women is not an accident, according to Knoepflmacher.

The story he tells goes something like this:

In the movement from the Mother Goose figure telling amusing or Grimm stories to her goslings around the hearth to the more formalized print-culture figure of the educating Mamma or governess imparting useful information in the schoolroom, women had dominated the early instruction and amusement of children. By the early nineteenth century in England, women writers specialized in a kind of moral domestic realism. Many of these stories, such as those by Anna Laetitia Barbauld, are restrictive and Gradgrindingly utilitarian. But in the hands of gifted writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and, particularly, Maria Edgeworth, they could prove more versatile. Tales such as Edgeworth's "Simple Susan" indeed have a marked didactic purpose—encouraging thrift, honesty, hard work, knowing one's place, and knowing one's worth—allied to their happy endings, but they also sympathetically portray the concerns and feelings of real children. Susan's heartache over her pet lamb, which she is willing to sell to the butcher in order to help the family finances, is convincingly and unsentimentally written; as a work of literature, "Simple Susan" is a collateral but unembarrassing cousin to Jane Austen. To male writers, however, all tales which encouraged domestic virtues within the confines of the merely possible seemed soul-deadening for post-Romantic children. In Knoepflmacher's view, Victorian male writers such as Ruskin, Thackeray, MacDonald, and Carroll "appropriated 'femininity' for their own ends" in "their common longing for a lost feminine complement."

What kind of "femininity" does Knoepflmacher mean here? Ruskin,

[1] VENTURES INTO CHILDLAND: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity, by *U.C. Knoepflmacher*. University of Chicago Press. $35.00.

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Thackeray, and MacDonald were all eager to re-establish fantasy as a child's birthright—and interestingly their entry points tended to be actual girl children: Effie Gray, Anny and Minny Thackeray, and Lily and Mary MacDonald (and let's not forget Alice Liddell). Knoepflmacher speculates that these male writers tended to identify themselves with girl-child figures of whom little was expected (they inaccurately believed) but passivity and goodness. Even when their stories have male protagonists, such as Gluck in Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* and little Diamond in MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, the boys exhibit these "feminine" traits. These male-authored fictional constructions located the period of childhood as a time that provided a synthesis between feminine and masculine, innocence and experience. Childland—this place of the imagination—was wrest from boys when they were thrown into the solely masculine world of the boarding school. Knoepflmacher cites the "plaintive letter" of Alfred Gatty, away at school at the age of eleven, to his older sister: "Do you mind writing me a story when you are well, for I can very seldom get a story book here." (That sister grew up to become Mrs. Ewing, one of the heroines of Knoepflmacher's tale.)

Expelled early, because they were boys, from their nursery gardens, male writers sought to regain those lost paradises in their stories, paradises composed of freedom from the restrictions and the responsibilities of socialization, particularly those imposed by women. For if these male writers were emotionally and imaginatively wounded by the separate spheres of Victorian life, they too partly sought to keep those spheres separate. Adult female figures tend to be absent (none in Ruskin), indifferent and smart (Fairy Blackstick in Thackeray), or malevolent and stupid (the Duchess or the Queen in *Alice*). Only MacDonald seemed able to imagine an authoritative woman who combines power with benevolence—although the figure of the North Wind, who nurtures little Diamond while causing fatal shipwrecks, can be considered benevolent only through his strangely mystical lens.

Carroll most explicitly challenged the older moral, realistic, and didactic traditions and brought the underground conflict between female and male modes of storytelling to the surface with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865 and *Through the Looking-Glass* in 1871. The Alice books are, in fact in the nature of love gifts—ones which are, as Knoepflmacher percipiently notes, "as sincere as they are selfish." As the books move away from the actual little girl who inspired them, Carroll is freed to express both his longing and his hostility towards his own expulsion from the warm family cocoon where he was sheltered on either side by pairs of sisters. Where Alice wants to enter the grown-up world, Wonderland's nonsense forestalls her best efforts to rehearse her hard-won knowledge; similarly, the aggressive pseudo-adults—stand-ins for Carroll himself—do all they can to prevent her maturation: "Off with her head!," indeed. The genderless Cheshire Cat (whose "self-castrating solicitude" is said to mirror another aspect of Carroll's psyche) is the

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sole exception to the universal aggression that infects even Alice's cat, Dinah. Carroll-the-narrator compels Alice to shrink and expand, but by the end of his novel it is ultimately biological rather than magical growth that will overtake her; for the most part Carroll strikingly avoids the issue of genuine maturation.

In Knoepflmacher's story, this male challenge, particularly Carroll's, to the female tradition was in turn challenged by a new wave of women writers. Women writers, however, tended to identify less with the child audience than with the adult female authority in the powerful and magical position of storyteller—the "mentoria" figure—to stave off the anarchic threat of fantasy. Within the newly popular mode of the fantastic, women writers told tales not of escape but of self-discovery leading to maturity on the part of the child-hero or -heroine. This renewed focus on *Bildung* was also allied to "contesting male idealizations of a feminized innocence." The most rebellious of these writers—Christina Rossetti—almost aggressively simplifies her aesthetic world down to near-baby talk; Jean Ingelow's solution is ultimately, though reluctantly, to banish us from the charms of fairyland. In short, women write anti-*Alice*s.

Mrs. Ewing emerges as the heroine of the second half of the book for her ability to "realign fantasy with the reality of everyday, to connect it to the domesticity that Victorian middle-class culture had assigned as the proper sphere for its queen-like matrons." In "Amelia and the Dwarves," for example, Ewing unmistakably rewrites *Alice* while at the same time self-consciously attaching her work both to the long-established female oral tradition of story-telling—in "Amelia" 's case, the Irish folk-tale "Wee Meg Barnileg and the Fairies"—and to more overtly didactic works by literary ancestresses along the lines of Edgeworth's "Simple Susan."

Nonetheless, Knoepflmacher rightly insists that "Amelia" is "much more than an adult homily about the redemption of an insufferably bratty bourgeois child." For one thing, Amelia's initial brattiness and ultimate redemption both stem from her intelligence and curiosity—precisely the qualities that were of no practical help to Alice in her underground adventures. In Ewing's tale, Amelia needs lessons in how rightly to direct her intelligence and energy, not in how to suppress them. Unlike Alice, Amelia both deserves and profits from the sadism of the underground denizens who accost her; also unlike Alice, Amelia learns how to best her adult underground tormentors by playing on their fond self-delusions—that older males must be irresistible to nubile girls, for example. By the end of the story, the bratty Amelia has become the much-loved Amy, but she has not lost her cleverness—she has learned to control it. In this, she resembles her author. Thus the tale of "Amelia" weds underground desires with socialized controls—and all pre-Freud. Knoepflmacher refrains from using currently trendy words such as "empowering," but stories like Ewing's "The Brownies" or "Amelia" do grant the child powers of change, action, and, above all, self-mastery which are denied to male-written figures such as Gluck or

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Alice (and which are very different from the youth-as-powerless-victim subject and tone of many award-winning books for preadolescents today).

For the most part, Knoepflmacher is a skilful storyteller. Perhaps his greatest strength is his ability to re-create the context of the time—his knowledge of Victorian literature and life is formidable, he finds unexpected but telling links between the lives of his authors, and the connections he draws between art and life can be unusually astute. He's at his best when he has a lot of critical elbowroom; the chapters on the least familiar works tell the most convincing stories. Perhaps inevitably, then, Knoepflmacher's two chapters on the Alice books, where he is almost visibly jostling for space among different critical views of the man and the books, are a disappointment; no ultimately coherent or persuasive story comes together. At some times, he seems to feel obliged to repeat certain irrelevant chestnuts, usually Freudian—that the animals emerging from the pool of tears resemble "helpless newborns, still dripping amniotic fluid." At other times, he seems overly eager to find new things to say: in one footnote, for instance, he speculates that Mary Ann, the White Rabbit's housemaid, might be "a joke at the expense of Mary Anne Evans, whose moral claims and erudition as George Eliot were occasionally questioned by those who brought up her class origins." He quickly covers himself: "Dodgson/Carroll's extraordinary allusiveness, much like Evans/Eliot's own, encourages his readers to hunt for analogues that may well seem far-fetched." Well, yes. Unfortunately, Knoepflmacher's sensible awareness of the temptations to overread Carroll seems to have been overpowered or weakened in these two chapters. A less serious but more pervasive weakness is that he could have provided clearer plot summaries for readers who aren't already familiar with the stories he discusses—which, I would guess, is almost everyone.

These concerns aside, Knoepflmacher's story fulfills an important criterion of traditional story-telling observed by Ewing: "a tale without a moral [is] like a nut without a kernel, not worth the cracking." Knoepflmacher's story, too, has a moral. The issue for the Victorian writers he considers was more than a power struggle between the sexes for the imaginations of England's children or for different modes of literature—it was ultimately also a battle over the nature and purpose of childhood. And it is this last issue that is particularly important for us, more than a century later, to consider. As a child refugee from Nazi Europe, Knoepflmacher views the possibility that childland can be extinguished as a very real one. He is not one of the "idolaters of childhood" who finds solace in escapism—he believes we cheat our children if we do not prepare them to leave childland for adolescence and adulthood. At the same time, he believes we maim our children if we do not give them the chance to live in childland—that haven from adult horrors. Knoepflmacher's own example as reader and teacher reminds us that these fictions are worth taking seriously. The best of

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Knoepflmacher's book allies scholarly knowledge with the pursuit of wisdom that is rare indeed.

Ventures into Childland, while far from being a narrow academic performance, is nonetheless likely to appeal to specialized interests. Readers who are more generally interested in the period might want to look at the anthology Knoepflmacher has coedited with Nina Auerbach, *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*.[2]

[2] Chicago, 1992.

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BROOKE ALLEN

Not Quite Dead

THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH COURTESAN Ninon de Lenclos once remarked that "If a man needs a religion to conduct himself properly in this world, it is a sign that he has either a limited mind or a corrupt heart." Her attitude was spirited and modern; more than three hundred years later, it is still a little too modern for many of us to swallow. In the absence of a firm idea of God, even the most intelligent human beings have had a hard time devising and adhering to a consensual code of morals and behavior.

In her new book of essays, *The Death of Adam*, Marilynne Robinson tackles this problem with her customary searching tendentiousness.[1] Robinson is the author of a single, extraordinary novel, *Housekeeping* (1981). Its eccentric and visionary sensibility raised great expectations for Robinson's literary future: it seemed almost inevitable that she would become one of the foremost novelists of her generation. But her passions carried her, instead, into the essay: political, theological, above all polemical. Robinson has never produced another novel.

In 1989 she let loose a scathing attack on Great Britain and its nuclear waste policies, entitled *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution.* Beginning with Sellafield, a nuclear plant which had for many years been pumping plutonium wastes into the Irish Sea and creating an underwater lake of noxious substances, Robinson eventually expanded *Mother Country* into a virulent critique not only of British industrial policies but of England itself, and the social and political attitudes that have continually, since the days of the Plantagenets, allowed the poor to be conceived of and treated as expendable detritus.

In *Mother Country* Robinson was at her most persuasive in urging her readers to examine their assumptions, their culture, their world view, in a clearer and more brutal light. "It is time we developed ways of describing the world which can give us a better sense of its health and prospects," she insisted, and stated that

> this book is essentially an effort to break down some of the structures of thinking that make reality invisible to us. These are monumental structures, large and central to our civilization. . . . I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth has been so injured while we were all

[1] THE DEATH OF ADAM: Essays on Modern Thought, by *Marilynne Robinson.* Houghton Mifflin Company. $24.00.

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bemused by supposed monuments of value and intellect, vaults of bogus cultural riches.

With *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, Robinson proposes to continue the project, this time tackling a wider array of subjects. Each of the essays asserts, Robinson writes in her introduction, "in one way or another, that the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong. . . . They undertake to demonstrate that there are other ways of thinking, for which better arguments can be made." She proposes, not unreasonably, that the vague "isms" which we have allowed to define our opinions and our social discourse are in effect fictions: that we as a culture, who do not read for example Marx, speak nonsense when we talk of Marxism; that we who do not read Adam Smith are mistaken when we call him a capitalist. "And now that we are supposedly talking to the Russians about democracy, how useful it would be if anyone had actually read Jefferson, or Lincoln." Her position is irrefutable: one has only to glance at the editorial page in the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* to find that no two people seem to mean quite the same thing when they speak of liberalism, or humanism, or indeed democracy. American history, as we are taught it, amounts to a "long campaign of dysphemism."

Nor are things getting any better, for the 1990s have seen a new type of politicized obscurantism. Robinson's comments upon it are not original, but they are unarguable: "Now when we read history, increasingly we read it as a record of cynicism and manipulation. . . . [W]e are so persuaded of the rightness of our judgment as to invalidate evidence that does not confirm us in it." Our intellectual solutions are pathetic: "we cling desperately to the idea that something is real and necessary, and we have chosen, oddly enough, competition and market forces, taking refuge from the wild epic of cosmic ontogeny by hiding our head in a ledger."

The iconoclastic introduction to *The Death of Adam* seemed to promise that the book would not only effect a demolition job on our era's countless misbegotten systems of thought, but also clear an unobstructed vista of open country in their stead. It was quite a surprise, then, to discover among the essays a heartfelt attack on Darwinism, whatever that term might mean—and Robinson herself doesn't seem any too sure—and a provocative attempt to rehabilitate John Calvin and his troubled legacy.

It seems perverse to discredit one faulty system of thought only to attempt to resurrect another that even at its best was itself surely faulty, namely Calvinism. But Marilynne Robinson is thoughtful and unconventional enough to deserve a hearing. *The Death of Adam* turns out to be one of those books in which almost any reader will find something to disagree with on almost every page, yet which at the same time inspires an unusual degree of productive thought.

"Darwinism," the first and longest essay in the book, is easily the most infuriating. For one thing, Robinson is loose with her terminology: the

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"Darwinism" she so despises seems more to resemble social Darwinism, as laid out in the nineteenth century by Herbert Spencer, than Darwinism as understood today, in which Charles Darwin is seen not as the inventor of a discrete, hermetic theory which can be judged "right" or "wrong" but as the founding father of a method of interpreting and explaining the irrefutable fact of biological change.

"We find the recrudescence of primitive economics," Robinson notes with distaste, "occurring alongside a new prominence of Darwinism. We find them separately and together encouraging the value of self-interest and raw competition." "Characteristically," she continues, ". . . Darwinists, like primitive economists, assume that what is humane . . . is unnatural."

Now it is true that much of the cruder economic thought of the last century and a half has equated self-interest and raw competition with some poorly-comprehended notion of the survival of the fittest, and used it as an excuse to trash welfare and social programs, and to denigrate private philanthropy as an encouragement to sloth. Yet to condemn Darwin and Darwinism wholesale, as Robinson does, is to throw the baby out with the bath water in the most egregious way. Certain principles of natural selection might well strike Robinson as unpalatable and unaesthetic; but because something is unpalatable does not mean that it is the less true, and to bemoan, not much differently than Tennyson did over a century ago, the cruelty of nature "red in tooth and claw" is a fruitless and foolish exercise.

Robinson makes the simplistic (not to say wrong) assertion that, according to "Darwinist" thought, to be stronger is to be better: better, that is, in a moral sense. The fact is that as long ago as 1872 Darwin had rejected that particular concept: "After long reflection I cannot avoid the conviction that no innate tendency to progressive evolution exists," he admitted, while today Stephen Jay Gould, our most popular and prolific writer on evolution, has not only scoffed at the theory of evolutionary progress but called it "a noxious, culturally embedded, untestable, nonoperational idea."

Robinson posits that according to "Darwinism," the fitter organism (specifically the human being), who survives, is in some way morally superior to or at least more viable than the unfit one who perishes. But fitness in Darwinist context means, quite simply, fitness for survival: certainly not fitness for altruism, generosity, moral beauty, aesthetic enjoyment, spiritual exaltation, or any of the other types of fitness religious or humanist societies hold dear.

In an attempt to disparage the entire Darwinist project, Robinson angrily points out that "we can have no grounds for saying that things have changed for the worse or for the better, in Darwinist terms. In other words, absent teleology, there are no grounds for saying that survival means anything more or other than survival." The only sane answer to that is that indeed there aren't. In any case the current consensus among scientists, summed up by paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey in his recent book *The Sixth Extinction*, is that "competition is no

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longer perceived as the powerful force it once was." "Chance played a disconcertingly powerful role in determining which species survived and which did not. . . . Survival was a matter of historical contingency, not good design."

Thus social Darwinism has finally been robbed of whatever respectability it once possessed, as opposed to biological Darwinism, which has undergone radical moderation but has not ceased to be central to scientific thought. Robinson's attack on social Darwinism is honest and compelling, but that on Darwinism *in toto* is poorly thought out, as is her gripe with "Freudianism": "what in the world could have moved us to choose anything so graceless and ugly?" she asks. Well, clearly the fact that it contains so much that we feel, that we *know*, to be true. Robinson is still focused upon the outdated and caricatured versions of "Darwinism" and "Freudianism" that continue to bloom like hothouse flowers in the fetid air of college English departments, rather than on the living and rapidly changing disciplines of biology and psychology, in which the original theories of Darwin and Freud are seminal without being held sacrosanct.

Robinson's real kvetch against Darwin, and by extension against science in general, is the old one that it has displaced religion, specifically the Protestant Christianity she champions. "But science cannot serve in the place of religion because it cannot generate an ethics or a morality. It can give us no reason to prefer a child to a dog, or to choose honorable poverty over fraudulent wealth. It can give us no grounds for preferring what is excellent to what is sensationalistic. And this is more or less where we are now." She concludes, rather in the manner of Pascal, by saying that because there does patently exist a natural moral code, then there must be a God. I think most of us would agree that such a moral code does exist, but might one not just as easily argue that it exists because it helps us (as a species rather than as individuals) to survive? Robinson herself hardly denies this possibility: "Perhaps," she speculates, "our unique moral capacities were designed to compensate for our singular power to do harm."

We are back to Ninon de Lenclos and her contention that only the limited and the corrupt should be in need of religion to tell them how to behave. Robinson objects to evolutionary theory because its wrong-headed interpretation has encouraged inhumane social policies, and because it does not make for as pretty a story as Genesis. But wishing Darwin away will not make his legacy disappear. The real challenge of the coming years will be not to return to organized religion, as Robinson urges, but to teach ourselves the art of behaving morally and responsibly in its inevitable absence.

The model for a religious society that Robinson boosts is that of the Puritan communities of the seventeenth century, specifically in America and Holland (she neglects, perhaps unsurprisingly, to mention the Puritan military dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell, or the overwhelming relief of the English people upon the Restoration of the irreligious,

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tolerant Charles II). In an extended essay called "Marguerite de Navarre," but really about John Calvin, Robinson proposes that Calvin and those, like the New England Puritan Jonathan Edwards, who governed according to his credo, do not deserve to be treated as the bogeymen they have become in popular memory.

Robinson makes some excellent points. Calvin's influence on our culture was once unrivalled, and continues to be significant: it behooves us to make some attempt to understand him and the nature of the political and theological system he created. Our current image of a Calvinist society is, however, a distortion bequeathed to us by, among others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose *Scarlet Letter* contained much truth but also went out of its way to blacken. Robinson gives the contrary point of view: "There are things for which we in this culture clearly are indebted to [Calvin], including relatively popular government, the relatively high status of women, the separation of church and state, what remains of universal schooling, and, while it lasted, liberal higher education, education in 'the humanities.' "

Our image of the grim, bearded ideologue preaching hellfire from his Geneva pulpit is a faulty one, as Robinson persuasively demonstrates. She points out that of the 1500 pages of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin's great, comprehensive work, only one paragraph is devoted to hell. Another surprise is that in the entire *Institutes*, Eve is never mentioned. "As a consequence," Robinson writes, "the thought that women carry any special burden of guilt or sinfulness cannot even arise, nor can the thought that sin bears any special relation to sexuality. This permits Cauvin [Calvin] to speak as he does of marriage, and it is one reason for the high status women have traditionally enjoyed in Calvinist societies."

In a companion essay, "Puritans and Prigs," Robinson effectively puts paid to the idea that contemporary priggishness—political correctness, *nouvelle cuisine*, the mania for aerobic exercise, etc.—are manifestations of our resurgent Puritan heritage. "Our modern zealots have dietary laws," she reminds us. "Puritans did not, Calvin having merely urged moderation. For him, many things were 'things indifferent,' that is, he considered it wrong to attach importance to them. This is a concept alien to the new zealotry." This is entirely true, and so, I believe, is Robinson's contention that such shibboleths have in fact come to serve as class indicators. The taste for fish, for Evian water, for yoga "are the tastes of people who are strongly identified in their own minds as virtuous, and . . . signs by which they make themselves recognizable to others and to themselves as virtuous."

Such indicators of virtue are spurious: they stand in for the real thing, which is notably absent. This was not true of the Puritans, Robinson points out, or of the nineteenth-century reformers and abolitionists who were their descendants and heirs.". . . [T]he moral high ground that in other generations was held by actual reformers, activists, and organizers trying to provoke debate and build consensus, is now held by people with no such intentions, no notion of what progress would be, no

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impulse to test their ideas against public reaction as people do who want to accomplish reform. It is my bitter thought that they may have made a fetish of responsibility, a fetish of concern, of criticism, of indignation."

This marvelous essay criticizes with fully justified anger the grotesque snobbishness and hypocrisy with which contemporary "liberal" society excludes the majority of the population from the cultural dialogue. The American salvation myth, Robinson contends, would have it that "certain people rise out of the mass in the process of understanding and rejecting all that is retrograde, and that, for those people, there is never any use for, nor even any possibility of, conversation on equal terms with those who remain behind." The contempt for the common man and the unwillingness among the so-called intelligentsia to accord him his humanity is one of the great shames of modern life; it was not the way of Calvinist societies, or even of Calvin himself, who preached that "there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves."

Marilynne Robinson's arguments for the usefulness and the beauty of religion, and her nostalgia for Puritan society and its tradition of social activism, are frequently convincing, successful in their object of inducing the reader to look back with a large measure of regret upon an ethos in which substance outweighed style, and in which "the assumption of present responsibility for the present state of things was a ritual feature of life."

The sticking point is that it is easy enough to praise these values, but by now impossible for us, as a society, to accept the corollary and inextricably linked parts of the Puritan ethos: the sole authority of the Scriptures, the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, salvation by faith, predestination, etcetera. If we are to build a worthy moral code for ourselves, it must grow out of what we believe, if, that is, we collectively believe anything at all. We are not all as lucky as Robinson herself, who, she writes, "felt God as a presence before I had a name for him, and long before I knew words like 'faith' or 'belief.' . . . [M]y archaic self might have been nothing other than a latter-day pagan whose intuitions were not altogether at odds with, as it happened, Presbyterianism."

Many of her readers will find it neither possible nor desirable to accept these things, and will take leave to doubt her robustly expressed opinion that religious faith is in itself a good thing. Robinson's emphasis on the utility (as opposed to the truth) of Christianity is distastefully redolent of Pascal's Wager, which has always struck me as a coward's way out, lacking the moral courage of simple atheism. Life might (just possibly) be more tolerable if we all believed in God, and the same God at that: but since this is no longer to be the case, we must learn to believe that we can and must regulate our treatment of one another and of our home the earth—even if in the end we turn out to be nothing more exalted than a uniquely destructive species of bipedal mammal.

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DICK ALLEN

Here It Is, Here We Are

AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, we live in a science fiction world. The imagery and tropes of science fiction dominate our most popular movies, our advertising, our television sets, our computers, video games, popular music, stage shows and videos, our obsession with trivia, our collective paranoia, our military strategies, and a fair amount of our religious feelings.

This science fiction is the "stuff" that the noted writer Thomas M. Disch pokes at in his entertaining and provocative 256-page examination of a genre that, like Godzilla, has been let loose in our collective imaginations. *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*, Disch says up front, "is not a literary history."[1] It is about "cultural impact." As such, it is long overdue—a pioneering look at what other cultural observers have ignored, almost certainly because science fiction has seldom been taken seriously as literature.

The term "science fiction" is itself confusing. Abbreviated as "SF," the term has come also to stand for speculative fiction, sci-fi, and science fantasy. Speculative fiction is a complimentary term, relating to the genre's quality elements; sci-fi mainly describes space operas and pulp fiction; science fantasy indicates fantasy with some element of science. The general term, SF, covers them all, although *science* fiction generally is understood to deal with actual scientific possibilities and fantasy with impossibilities.

Disch's study, readers should be forewarned, is as much a curious amalgamation as the different types of SF. Written from the perspective of an insider (the author has written highly regarded SF novels and short stories, in addition to excellent works of "mainstream" literature—which is what those inside the genre call all that is not SF), it assumes a fair amount of basic knowledge of the genre and the genre's authors. Moreover, during his early years of writing primarily SF, Disch was a card-carrying member of what is known as the "New Wave" or the "Young Turks" of SF. As he says, "Virtually the entire U.S. component of the New Wave shared a common missionary goal of wanting to bring some literary couth to a genre we all regarded as exciting but basically déclassé." New Wave was to be "science fiction without spaceships." His skepticism about the genre has continued, and although he maintains "I

[1] THE DREAMS OUR STUFF IS MADE OF: How Science Fiction Conquered the World, by *Thomas M. Disch*. The Free Press. $25.00.

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have no intention of 'debunking' science fiction," he digs at it continually.

Until SF recently supersaturated our culture, for Disch, the "golden age of science fiction [was] twelve, the age we begin to read SF and are wonderstruck." Most SF "is a form of popular entertainment." Its most successful traditional authors "maintain the clarity and innocence of wise children." When SF has older readers, many are those "whose taste in reading was dictated by the nerd within." Contemporary SF, he says, is "an industry" with advantage going to authors with "a permanent mindset that is forever young." To some extent, such an attitude seems sour grapes, for the New Wave did not ultimately transform the field, as Disch and fellow writers hoped, nor does present-day SF concentrate on "a realism of the future" which, to Disch, "has been the ambition of most good SF writers."

Culture is another story. America, Disch says, is a nation of liars, and SF is fertile ground not only for the encouragement of whoppers but for the admiration of lies told well and gotten away with—a phenomenon also noted and used heavily by William Faulkner and Mark Twain. With the concept of acceptable and entertaining lies as a basis, Disch can thus make connections between Tawana Brawley, Oliver North, Whitley Strieber (that man who claims, in what are now becoming quickly forgotten best-selling books, that he is constantly being kidnapped by aliens), L. Ron Hubbard (the SF writer who invented—mainly for profit—what became the religion of Scientology), UFO stories. Since "science fiction is not about predicting the future but examining the present," SF is especially useful in providing us with ways to adjust to the unimaginable. Take the Bomb, for instance. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove (or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb)* "was catharsis by comedy. The stored-up anxieties of almost two decades of nuclear anxiety were released in a saturnalia of laughter that for many of us actually made good on the promise of the subtitle: we learned to stop worrying and to live with (if not to love) the bomb."

One importance of the "Star Trek" TV series is that it was "among the first . . . to show how to behave in an environment—the office or the schoolroom—where differences of gender and race have been declared officially invisible. Before political correctness or multiculturalism had become debating topics, *Star Trek* was their prophet." Additionally, Disch discusses the strong links between some SF writers and the military and NASA, especially in the formation of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, to which many conservatives attribute the fall of the Soviet Union, due to the pressure trying to match it exerted on the Soviet Union economy. And in looking at a current trend of cyberpunk, an SF fictional mode of computer and punk rocker consciousness, Disch accurately describes how

> Cyberpunk neither glosses over the evils of the real world nor entertains hope of a Le Guinishly sound New Jerusalem. In the

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> cyberpunk future, Third World poverty belongs to everyone, and the American dream has gone belly up. This version—call it Pop Despair—is ameliorated only by two elements: fashion and an interior life lived in cyberspace. The best hope it offers is that one may be in possession of one's own sensorium, and in that it is a literature designed to reconcile the youth of middle-class America to their lot, to what they've got: sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll; their hair, their skin, and the clothes on their backs; the fizzing pixels on the video monitor. These are increasingly the options enjoyed and celebrated by Generation X in our own time; tomorrow the fans of cyberpunk will be the managers of the world they are imagining now. . . . In its essential solipsism, it is also the world that SF has been assiduously constructing since the time of Poe . . . worlds that were diagrams of his own psyche, that house [of Usher] and its surrounding dreamscapes being the allegorical externalizations of the poet's disintegrating mind, worlds as entirely (and merely) symbolic as cyberspace.

This last understanding of the near-future world, Disch shows, has been particularly illuminated by the works of J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick.

Disch has high admiration for Ballard's and Dick's novels and short stories, an admiration I share. Ballard, he says, "invented Inner Space," the inner space of Self that pervades pop culture. Disch also notes how H.G. Wells is regarded by fans as the "greatest science fiction writer of the century," but he has much less to say for Jules Verne. Robert Heinlein he finds successful primarily because he's so readable, but Disch deplores Heinlein's militarism, the Fascist tendencies of Heinlein's tales, as well as their final solipsism. Disch notes the excellent qualities of women SF writers such as Joanna Russ, Vonda McIntyre, Anne McCaffrey and Ursula K. Le Guin, but is irked by the increased feminism of Le Guin which made her choices of work to be included in the canon-setting *Norton Book of Science Fiction* which she edited into more of a feminist tract than a truly useful anthology of the genre's best work.

SF studies compete with each other for definitively identifying the true inventor of the genre. Most give that credit to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, because of how it demonstrates technology (i.e., Frankenstein's monster) turning upon its creator. Disch discounts Shelley and Verne as the true founders of SF since in the modern day they're virtually unread. Instead, he builds an interesting case for the works of Edgar Allan Poe, in which he finds incipient almost all the major themes and images of SF, such as "wish fulfillment, pop theology, pseudoscientific persiflage." Unfortunately, a great deal of his evidence rests on several short stories by Poe which are as unread as Mary Shelley's novel—rather than on the five or six best-known ones—and underplays how a secondary source (versions and variations on the Frankenstein monster motif and on Verne's inventions) often has a much larger and more important impact than the primary one.

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Disch's biases account for other weaknesses in this study. Although he especially admires the science of Hal Clement's novel, *Mission of Gravity*, Disch almost totally ignores the role of *science* in science fiction. One of the primary reasons for reading "hard-core" SF is to gain an elementary understanding of how science works, or may work, and how scientific and technological changes may influence the near and far future. Scientists all over the world whose work focuses on the future have commonly reported that their first inspiration came from SF. For numerous scientists, SF still remains favorite reading material.

Nor does Disch give more than scant attention to the importance of holistic and ecological perspectives in SF. I'd argue that one of SF's primary areas of cultural importance is how, in countless works, it attempts to show the *entire* picture, and is especially fine in demonstrating how one seemingly small change in an environment can have world-shaking consequences—a perspective highly needed as Earth increasingly becomes simultaneously both a global community and a fracturing one. Also, Disch greatly downplays the wonder and awe and adventure aspects of SF, those characteristics which make it an epic rather than a "realistic" form of literature. He doesn't much deal with the "What If?" and extrapolation aspects of SF and doesn't care to make much distinction between Science Fiction. Speculative Fiction, Science Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and Horror categories of the genre. "Planet Building" and "Planet Trek" stories get little mention. And he slights the connection between science fiction and detective fiction—in both of which rational deduction and mystery-solving by rational means play major roles. He is, however, brilliant in discerning how parallel universe and alternative universe stories provide cultural "explanations" of strange beliefs that have no rational basis.

This is not a book of history, nor a scholarly study, nor a honed critical examination of specific SF works. Rather, it is a loosely-written and at times self-admittedly subjective Cook's tour around and about some of the author's pet theories and pet peeves, with the relationship between SF and culture being the basic theme. From this theme, Disch constantly and amusingly digresses, often for pages, into anecdotes about his meetings with SF authors, criticisms of religion, displeasure with feminism and Afrocentricity, dislike of hack writing, theories about the atom bomb, mockeries of SF fandom, musings about the Heaven's Gate cult, Newt Gingrich, the Oklahoma City bombing, the connections between the far right and Isaac Asimov's work, the demise of the book publishing industry—always with slams against dumbness.

Still, its main premise remains on target. From this genre led by "magazinists" like Poe, writers for money, speedwriters, delusionists and liars, the primitive Id has fully emerged. We can make fun of SF, its normally weak characterization, its sappy dialogue, its formula plots, the childishness of the Sword & Sorcery fad, but, in the words of one of Bob Dylan's surrealistic songs about the Zeitgeist, "something is happening here" that Mr. Jones doesn't understand.

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I'm only a few months older than Thomas Disch. Like Disch, I grew up reading SF—many of the same SF books that Disch loved were also my favorites. But while Disch, inspired by college training in the New Criticism, sought to import serious literary elements into SF, in the first books I wrote and edited (SF poetry and SF college text-anthologies) I sought to reinvigorate serious quality literature with strong elements of pop culture and bedrock storytelling. Both of us, I think, were right, and I agree with Disch that some "New Wave" British and American SF represented a direction that could and should have been more fruitfully developed, just as I suspect that Disch would agree with me that there was a need, in the 1950s and 1960s, to beware of elitist critical theories which were taking serious literature too far from the general educated reading public. What I didn't foresee, and perhaps Disch did, was how rapidly pop culture would become mainstream. Despite all the elements of SF I'd continue to praise (mainly from hard-core SF and speculative fiction, unlike Disch's "realism of the future"), it is the Sci-Fi, fantasy, horror and entertainment aspects which now dominate. SF as a thinking person's fiction of ideas and extrapolations and warnings and perspective is not in the ascendancy. Instead, it is paranoia, trivia, fashion, sex, drugs, rock and roll and special effects which occupy the minds of the young, especially.

As to SF's failure to produce major novels comparable to great works by Tolstoi, Melville and others, Disch is relatively silent. He does, however, insist (I agree) that *1984*, *Brave New World* and a fair amount of Kurt Vonnegut's and Doris Lessing's works are truly SF, and he praises some old and new classics in the field, like Arthur Bester's *The Demolished Man*, Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a number of Philip K. Dick's best books, with additional mention of novels by Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin, J.G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock and especially Joseph Haldeman's *The Forever War* (I'd add novels by Stanislaw Lem). Writers such as Arthur Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Joanna Russ and William Gibson are also mentioned. But there's no real examination of Frederik Pohl, Poul Anderson, Clifford D. Simak, William Tenn, Greg Bear, David Brin . . . and I could go on and on. Especially regrettable is the omission of any study of the stories of Harlan Ellison.

Nonetheless, Disch convinces us that any cultural study of our century which does not deal seriously with the genre is or will be fatally flawed. Our stuff *is* made out of such SF dreams, like it or not. The entertainment and news media have merged, just as SF writers long ago predicted they would. In America, we are awash in the obsessive trivia pursuits boosted by the Media: the O.J. Simpson case, the death of Princess Diana, the Monica Lewinsky scandal . . . and more will come. Reality and fantasy boil together in a surrealistic chaos. The various crises—ozone layer depletion, war, overpopulation, economic collapse, fall of Communism—are broadcast to us as having the same importance and reality as the reports of traffic tie-ups on the nightly news. We may not believe in much, but we "entertain" beliefs in UFOs and robots as easily as we

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accept how millions of us are being drawn into the great World Wide Web. To an "X-Files" mentality, false may be true and true may be false, and it's all a big game anyway.

At this point so much of what SF writers predicted and dreamed has become everyday reality that, to whatever extent SF may or may not have been the cause, we now literally occupy a time we had previously only imagined. Such a realization is completely disorienting. Since we were trained to think of the reality we now inhabit as fantasy, we now cannot help thinking that we are living in fantasy.

And SF has broken down the boundaries between reality and fantasy, to the extent that we have, as Disch rightly observes, succumbed to the "pleasures of self-delusion." We've tamed "the Bomb" by co-opting it. We've given—as SF writers sadly knew we would—much of our lives over to staring at TV and computer screens where everyone and everything runs amok. SF's cultural importance is the biggest kept dirty little secret of our collective lives, hidden, like Poe's purloined letter, right in plain view.

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SUSAN BALÉE

Ideology and Its Discontents

HAVING JUST SEEN AN ABSOLUTELY DREADFUL PLAY—*Rent*—that elevates ideology over art, I was relieved to read James Tuttleton's recently-published meditation on the importance of an aesthetic ideal in literature.[1] Tuttleton will not be particularly appreciated in an era that gave a Pulitzer Prize to the likes of *Rent*, a play in thrall to political correctness (the hero(ine) of the play is a homeless, cross-dressing AIDS sufferer named Angel who first appears in the play after killing a dog by throwing it out a window, an act that is praised by all who hear of it; Angel is later upheld as the most loving, wonderful (wo)man any of the characters have ever encountered).

In a time that views art merely as the container for ideology, to advocate an aesthetic principle in evaluating works of literature—indeed, to attempt to "evaluate" various works at all—sets a critic such as Tuttleton at cross-purposes with his own historical moment. The true measure of his worth is likely to come when the pendulum swings away from politics, and readers once again seek "the best that has been thought and felt" in art. As my friends and I left the theater last week (we slipped out while the mostly teen-something crowd was giving the *Rent* cast a standing ovation), I commented that we were certainly living in an iron age of literature. "Iron!" snorted one of my friends. "I'd say a cement age of literature." Unlucky us. But brave Professor Tuttleton.

As I opened *A Fine Silver Thread*, I was immediately struck by the way it seemed to respond to the play I had just seen (and paid much too much for—I doubt if any of New York's homeless, transvestite, living-with-AIDS folk will be able to afford a ticket to this show celebrating their perky, drug addicted, song-&-dance-a-minute existence down in Alphabet City). In my opinion, Tuttleton's book is worth buying for the preface alone.

> Shame is the grand touchstone of our time. . . . Insensitivity has been ratcheted up to one of the Seven Deadly Sins. To offend, even if through honest criticism, is not permitted. We live in an age of wounded sensibilities. . . . This book is for [those] who think that discriminations of literary quality are not only possible but necessary.

[1] A FINE SILVER THREAD: Essays on American Criticism and Writing, by *James W. Tuttleton*. Ivan R. Dee, Inc. $26.00. This review was written before Professor Tuttleton's death on November 6, 1998.

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Tuttleton believes that an aesthetic principle not only exists, but that it matters. As he so aptly puts it, "Only those who do not have it deny that good taste exists or will assert that it is a mask for class, racist, or sexist prejudice." As he goes on to argue, a work that is overly ideological cannot survive its era; only those writings that rise above the politics of their era and take on timeless qualities of humanity can hope to endure.

For example, to recur one last time to *Rent*, one of its songs is already hopelessly out of date, even though the play debuted a mere two years ago. A couple of the HIV-positive characters sing a tune that begins, "Time for my AZT break. . . . " If this play were as up-to-the-minute as it tries to be, the characters would sing, "Time for my protease-inhibitor cocktail. . . ." Admittedly, such a revision would mess up the rest of the lyrics, nor is Jonathan Larson around to pen it. But the point is, time flies and literature devoted to topical issues becomes dated as fast as last week's newspapers. People hang onto art: they put it on their bookshelves, hang it on the walls, play it on the stereo, watch it on the VCR. What do people do with last week's newspapers? Stick 'em in paper bags for the recycling truck. Or use them to line the cat box.

James Tuttleton's provenance is American literature, covering writers who settled this chunk of the North American continent. He begins with Washington Irving, often thought to be the Father of American Literature, and his task is "to discover the law, or rule, by which genius operates. . . ." In other words, in the writers whose art endures, might there be a guiding genius, an aesthetic principle that animates and shapes their work?

Certainly, in *The Sketch Book*, Irving was trying to find one. As Tuttleton convincingly presents the case, "retrieving some vestige, through narrative, of a transient existence—this is the burden of many of the tales in *The Sketch Book*." In "The Art of Book Making," Irving's narrator, Crayon, is an American traveler visiting the British Museum. Here he sees stacks and stacks of once-read books now moldering into the illegible black of age, no longer read, heading for oblivion. Although literature represents a way of transcending time, the protean nature of language itself undermines the project. Crayon seems to anticipate late-twentieth-century literary theorists when he observes, "the purity and stability of language . . . on which you found your claims to perpetuity, have been the fallacious dependence of authors of every age. . . . Unless thought can be committed to something more permanent and unchangeable a medium, even thought must share the fate of everything else and fall into decay."

In the English tradition, only one writer seems to be escaping the way of all words, and this writer is Shakespeare who, Irving observes, seems "proof against the mutability of language, because [he has] rooted [himself] in the unchanging principles of human nature." Washington Irving, aware of the "wizard influence" of Shakespeare on both readers and other writers, tries to inhabit the Bard's imagination, to do what he did with words and thus ride his comet-tail to immortality. Where Irving

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catches the comet, Tuttleton believes, is in his use of folklore and myth, a universality that transcends both time and culture. Hence he gives us Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane and offers American readers a world that exists outside of time and thus cannot be destroyed by its passing. Nearly two hundred years later, Americans still read these works of imagination with avid interest, and one would be hard pressed to find an elementary school child who couldn't identify Rip Van Winkle or the Headless Horseman. So far, at least, time has not erased the memory of Washington Irving.

Irving, Tuttleton shows us, stands in sharp contrast to James Fenimore Cooper, an American writer whose books are becoming increasingly harder to read because of their emphasis on the political rift between early-nineteenth-century New Yorkers and Cooper's detested "damn Yankees" of New England. In fact, though Cooper was a prolific novelist, it is only his romances of the forest, such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, that remain much read today.

Tuttleton's essay on Edgar Allan Poe engaged me most, probably because I teach Poe in both Southern fiction and nineteenth-century literature classes. Although many Poe scholars are now aware of the fact, it bears repetition, Tuttleton maintains, that Poe's reputation as a demented drunk is not deserved. It seems that "Poe's reputation is the unfortunate consequence of persistent errors of fact and interpretation that have twisted the public view of Poe from the very beginning." The source of this contumely is the Reverend Rufus Wilmot Griswold, a jealous and malicious literary dilettante whose work Poe had once criticized. Poe, foolishly, thought him a friend and appointed him his literary executor. Griswold took his new position seriously, and his first deed as executor was to compose the official "obituary" (signed with a pen name) that portrayed Poe as an unhinged, bloodthirsty, ambition-crazed misanthrope, a view of him that was replicated with the obit in a score of other papers across the country. Griswold solidified this portrait of a repellent Poe with his "Memoir of the Author," which he had the audacity to attach to his edition of Poe's works in 1850.

Griswold's uncharitable view has dominated most readers' impression of Poe the man, whom we've been invited to confuse with Poe the personae from his works—characters who are often themselves insane, morbid, violent. But Poe is no Roderick Usher, Tuttleton explains, and he proves his point with excerpts from a log of Poe's day-to-day life. In this we discover that he "indeed had many friends, that he had a Southerner's point of honor and sense of chivalry, that if he had ambition it was a passion to create enduring masterworks of literature and to elevate the aesthetic taste of his country and time. . . ." It's true that Poe did drink, could be surly, and wounded a great number of egos with his piercing, apposite literary reviews. But he was not the maniacal misanthrope his first biographer made him out to be, and he is not simply a flesh-and-blood rendering of one of his demented characters. Instead, he is their creator, not only infinitely more complex, but sane

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enough to craft his fictions with a professional's precision and attention to detail, responsible enough to support his family with regular free-lance writing engagements and editorial work.

Tuttleton, I think, does an excellent job of showing us Poe at work and at home—a troubled man, certainly, with a troubled home life, but not a malevolent, psychotic spirit. In Tuttleton's believable vision of him, Poe stands in nineteenth-century American letters as both a very influential literary critic and a well-known, highly praised creative writer. Few critics nowadays can claim the double credentials, and Poe's enabled him to direct readers to those works most likely to move them emotionally and intellectually. He had his own ideal aesthetic principle, and he outlined it in "The Poetic Principle": great art—literature, music, painting—transforms those who come in contact with it. Exposure to great art enables people to transcend their egos and their historical moment in the service of something greater than either: the appreciation and desire for beauty.

Edgar Allan Poe rendered a great service to American literature, and James Tuttleton has rendered the same service to Poe himself.

Though I could not be persuaded to reconsider the works of William Dean Howells, the piece immediately after the one on Poe, the two chapters on Henry James and Henry Adams combine to form—like the men themselves—an intriguing pair. If Poe represents the intense emotion of mid-nineteenth-century American Romanticism, these two represent the cerebral height of fin-de-siècle social realism. Both James and himself, Henry Adams thought, were of a type: "bourgeois-bostonien." Adams believed that growing up in Boston and Cambridge had rendered them shallow, socially uncertain, and nervously self-conscious. Henry James could not agree, but this did not obviate his lifelong friendship with Adams, nor his deep fondness for Clover Adams, Henry's wife. James thought Clover "a perfect Voltaire in petticoats," though perhaps he may have been less charmed by her if he had known her assessment of his novels: "James's trouble" was not that he bit off more than he could chaw, but that "he chaws more than he bites off."

Nevertheless, after Clover's suicide and the loss of so many mutual friends, it was Henry James and Henry Adams who survived as representatives of their era. In old age, their books neglected and their genius grown dusty, the two men held the last remnant of their shared history between them. As Adams wrote to a friend in 1913, "At about three in the morning I wobble all over the supposed universe. A little indigestion starts whole flocks of strange images, and then I wonder what Henry James is thinking about as he is my last standard of comparison." For his part, James did not fear the loss of the past. As he replied on 21 March 1914 to a gloomy letter from Adams, "*Of course* we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss . . . [but] I still find my consciousness interesting. . . . It's because I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility. . . ."

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Writing, for James, was an act of life. He reminded Adams that his own essays and books were also acts of life, and that they would endure even if the writer could not. Tuttleton's chapters on these two men whose works have endured—Adams as a groundbreaking American autobiographer, Henry James as the finest fictive chronicler of American class consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century—bring them back to life for contemporary readers. Tuttleton has done what the best critics do: he has inspired me to go back to James and Adams and read them with fresh eyes.

Meanwhile, Tuttleton's essay on Edith Wharton situates her next to her old friend Henry James, and Tuttleton reminds the reader of his original thesis: Wharton began her literary career writing novels of social reform (e.g., *The Fruit of the Tree*), but these will not be among her enduring works for in them ideology overwhelms art. Or, as Tuttleton amusingly terms it, Wharton is tripped up by "the perils of abstract idealism." He believes "the novel is, in fact, backbroken . . . it has just two themes: labor reform and euthanasia." Both of these issues, though they have larger contexts, are rendered topical in Wharton's treatment. The industrial system of nineteenth-century Massachusetts that Wharton depicts here no longer exists; and because her story is ideologically tied to redressing the injustices of that system, her novel loses interest for the modern reader. Again, it is only those tales that transcend their era through a depiction of human nature that seem to have the power to attract future generations of readers.

A Fine Silver Thread leads us through the library of American literature (much more of a labyrinth than one would have thought), and the chapter on Wharton is succeeded by essays devoted to Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Conrad Aiken, and Louis Auchincloss. Tuttleton wields a powerful critical light, illuminating every writer who comes beneath his scrutiny. Indeed, he pursues some writers right off the literary map in his essay "Tracking the American Novel into the Void." This essay makes sense of what has otherwise been a puzzling symptom of current American fiction: its obsession with dystopias and conspiracy theories. Here, Tuttleton's immense knowledge of the history of American literature comes to bear on the most recent specimens.

This is the book I would give to anyone thinking about enrolling in a Ph.D. program in literature in these dreary theory days. James Tuttleton debunks ideological constructions and author functions. Instead, Tuttleton reminds us of why we like to read, and why we read what we do.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

Expansive Poetry

MORE THAN A DECADE HAS PASSED since the anthologies *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, edited by David Lehman, and *The Direction of Poetry*, edited by Robert Richman, made the first ensemble attempts to recognize a change in our poetry: the renewed interest in form. It has been ten years since the special issue of *Crosscurrents* (1989), edited by Dick Allen, gave the name Expansive poetry to the writing of a number of poets, most of them in their thirties, who argued for more accessible poetries, including the use of form and story, and honest, clear, critical prose that illuminated texts for general readers.

Since then the early Expansive poets, and others of their generation with whom they share common ground, have published more than a hundred books of poetry and criticism, and hundreds of magazine and newspaper essays and reviews. All of this work has served many useful purposes, not the least of which was giving the lie to the claims of some critics (who seldom bothered to read the writers they were criticizing) that Expansive poets could not back up their goals with their own poems. Like it or not, the poems, essays, and reviews by Expansive poets have done much of the work that needed to be done in order to open up the field, making the appreciation of poetry outside writing programs and the academy possible once more. Expansive poets created an atmosphere of greater tolerance for poetry written in traditional meters, for poetry that rhymes, for poetry that tells stories. One need only look at the latest issue of one's favorite literary quarterly to witness more and more established free verse poets suddenly writing in form and narrative.

"Do you get the feeling you've won?" Donald Hall said to me at the Associated Writing Program convention two years ago in Washington, D.C. I was standing outside a room where more than two hundred people had crowded in to hear a panel built around *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism*, the first anthology to represent the Expansive poets. Of course, Hall knows, as I do, that poets who get caught up in winning as they attempt to revise the canon stride through dangerous brush. Poets who get carried away with winning prizes are equally misguided. In the poetry business, the prize-giving process is usually so tainted by conflicts of interest that only the uninitiated and the naive can possibly be impressed. Winning is not the point. Having something artful and important to say, and having an opportunity to say it, is really all that matters. Like the successful writers before them, Expansive poets have

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had to fight for the opportunity to be heard, and I suppose that *is* a kind of winning—the right to address an audience at large.

But even as Expansive poets and their concerns have become a significant part of our poetry landscape, strange disappointments shadow them. One is that many of their critics still have not read their work. Another is the odd attitude recently adopted, it seems, by some older, established poets, that Expansive poetry never really happened, that it doesn't mean a thing. In a recent *American Book Review* article, the reviewer claims that Expansive poets can't be taken seriously until they write as well as John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, and Robert Pinsky. One might be puzzled by the list, for Pinsky has himself been linked to Expansive poetry. And one can summon up a growing legion of readers who would argue that many Expansive poets *do* write as well as, or better than, Ashbery and Graham. Such an assertion, in such a review, is confusing, but only until one recognizes the embarrassing attempt at favor-trading, the smack-smack-smack of lips kissing up, kissing up. Still, the *ABR* writer finds an ally in a recent *Parnassus* writer's opinion that Expansive poets are bad because they are Populists. Dozens of urban and ethnic Expansive poets are no doubt grateful to be instructed in their populist roots. Others might ask, with Mark Twain, "*Is* Populism bad?"

If this type of shrill name-calling is sad to see, the other development is even worse. At that AWP panel, Henry Taylor surprisingly attacked Expansive poetry. As far as most of us could make out, he was just tired of it all. In the introduction to the latest volume of *Best American Poetry*, editor John Hollander dismisses new formalism, which is to say Expansive poetry, as just silly. These reactions by an older guard remind me of the envy and regret felt by some who loiter on the dock as a ship they would like to be on sails out to sea.

The world of poetry has always had its moments of generosity. Some, no matter how busy, will write jacket comments for new books if they possibly can; some donate money to favorite literary organizations, or to writer-friends in need. But today, it seems that acknowledgement and attribution are in short supply. Some older poets appear to be genuinely surprised, even caught off guard, by the success and growing influence of Expansive poetry. What else but fear can possibly be at work here, fear concerning who or what will have the last word? I have noticed a deer-in-the-headlights look to much of the dismissive protest waged against Expansive poetry. It is the most banal of desperate, historical revisions. Where fifteen years ago the status quo held that free verse was good, formal verse was bad, and Expansive poets hardly existed, today their argument holds that free verse *and* form are good, but Expansive poets are evil.

The practice of criticizing work you have not read, and the attitude that a thing does not exist when in fact it does, are as goofy as the Disney character himself. Through their talent and diligence, Expansive poets are most responsible for the sea change in American poetry. They have

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opened up more possibilities, more terrain, for all poets. Only the small-minded, the running scared, persist in denying the truth.

The poets whose new books are discussed here have all been influenced by Expansive poetry, and have benefited by the more tolerant climate brought about by its poets. Mary Karr's *Viper Rum* ends, for example, with an essay, "Against Decoration."[1] Originally appearing in *Parnassus*, the essay's tone and format are similar to some of the polemical essays from *The Reaper* magazine, especially *The Reaper*'s non-negotiable demands, which appeared in its third issue almost twenty years ago. Karr has a lot to say with which Expansive poets agree. When she warns against obscurity of character, metaphor, and place, meaningless references, and overwriting, she lines up with Mary Jo Salter, Dana Gioia, David Mason, and dozens of other Expansive poets. So it is strange to watch her jump back and forth, as if weaving from lane to lane, to attack what she calls the neo-formalists (yet another variation on the name given to Expansive poets). "All too many contemporary poems," Karr writes, "particularly those in the burgeoning neo-formalist canon, shy away from passion." She cites "the vast majority of *New Yorker* poems" as evidence, and challenges Robert Richman's anthology, *The Direction of Poetry: Rhymed and Metered Verse Written in the English Language Since 1975.*

It will come as a shock to many that *The New Yorker* is, or ever was, a bastion of Expansive poetry. It will also surprise thousands of readers that their favorite contemporary poems lack passion. In putting together his anthology, Richman had no intention of representing Expansive (or neo-formalist) poetry. In fact, his book contains much more work by an older generation that is not always in sync on a number of issues with Expansive poets. Unfortunately, in drawing her conclusions, Karr misses that key point: "Sadly, the only thing that *is* news about neo-formalism is bad news. Rarely before has form been championed as a virtue in and of itself, and poems judged formally good that in fact lack any relevance to human experience."

The history of the last ten years has already proved this contention dead wrong, but Karr's mistake was an honest one. At the time she composed her essay, she did not fully understand the issues of Expansive poetry, and she had not read enough of the work before going on the attack. The only "neo-formalist" texts she refers to are Richman's anthology, and, briefly, Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures.* She pummels Michael Blumenthal and the late Amy Clampitt, because for Karr they are primary examples of neo-formalism. This comes as another surprise, for most Expansive poets share Karr's dislike for the work of both of these writers. It is not a bad idea to conclude a short book of poems with an essay, and there is much that is clear, honest, and valuable in "Against

[1] VIPER RUM, by *Mary Karr.* New Directions. $19.95.

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Decoration." I just wish Karr had revised it, because the essay now seems dated, historically inaccurate.

Luckily, that is not the case with the poetry. Karr's grim wit and compressed, charged language seldom fail in *Viper Rum*'s twenty-nine poems. The details of Karr's life are well known, so one might expect the current of post-alcoholic elegy running throughout the collection:

> At the end we prayed for death . . .
> Each white second was knit
> into a sheet that settled over his features
> like a snowfield. Forgive me,
> Father, this terrible face.
> I was the patient one.
> I got what I wanted.
>
> "The Patient"

That white second, a unit of time becoming a sheet that settles over the father's face like a snowfield, is surprising, appropriate metaphor-making. At the same time, Karr's poems contain abundant formal echoes. She is fond of tercets, and makes able use of internal rhyme. The poems about her mother—"Four of the Horsemen (Hypertense and Stroke, Coronary Occlusion and Cerebral Insult)," "Beauty and the Shoe Sluts," "The Invention of God in a Mouthful of Milk," and "Belongings"—her addled, spunky addresses to God—"The Wife of Jesus Speaks," "The Last of the Brooding Miserables," "The Grand Miracle," and "Christ's Passion"—and short narratives like "Hubris" and "Adieu" are especially rewarding. Karr can also be the life of any party, as the wicked poem, "Revenge of the Ex-Mistress" makes hilariously clear. In this third volume, Karr's poems set her apart from her ornamental mentors, her ornamental peers.

I look forward to any new book of poetry or prose by Wendell Berry. *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997* is especially uplifting.[2] The poems originate in Berry's Sunday morning walks through the Kentucky countryside. As he explains in his preface, they were "written in silence, in solitude, mainly out of doors." We have begun to see a resurgence in religious writing—or at least writing about religious matters—in poetry, and these one hundred twenty-four formal meditations are part of that. This is restorative, a welcome development that will bring more readers to poetry. It may even play a part in elevating from pettiness the discourse of so much contemporary poetry.

There is, of course, none of that in anything that Berry turns his hand to. *A Timbered Choir* includes the poet's familiar meditations on farming and the land itself, remembrances of old friends and elegies for friends and neighbors who have moved on, and love poems to his wife, Tanya.

[2] A TIMBERED CHOIR: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997, by *Wendell Berry*. Counterpoint Press. $22.00.

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There is, in fact, the quality of the love poem in all of Berry's verse, as well as the unmistakable note of gentle instruction.

> The best reward in going to the woods
> Is being lost to other people, and
> Lost sometimes to myself. I'm at the end
> Of no bespeaking wire to spoil my goods;
>
> I send no letter back I do not bring.
> Whoever wants me now must hunt me down
> Like something wild, and wild is anything
> Beyond the reach of purpose not its own.
>
> Wild is anything that's not at home
> In something else's place. This good white oak
> Is not an orchard tree, is unbespoke,
> And it can live here by its will alone,
>
> Lost to all other wills but Heaven's—wild.
> So where I most am found I'm lost to you,
> Presuming friend, and only can be called
> Or answered by a certain one, or two.
>
> "II, 1995"

One may hear an echo of Frost's way of saying things; one may even think of Jeffers' uncompromising morality. The expression of Berry's artful, rural life walks us, clear-headed, onto the emotional bridge that still exists between America's pastoral past and its urban, mechanized present. Berry is able to do this because his traditional faith is not troubled by the doubts and out and out revolts that rock many of the spiritual revivalists among us. If this makes Berry our perfect Parson of Poetry, then so be it. God knows we can benefit from more writers showing us new ways to talk about God.

Before leaving this book, I wish to commend its very handsome production—it is the most beautiful book of the thirty or so I considered for this chronicle—and to salute the work of David Bullen, who since the early days of North Point Press has created legendary designs.

The story that drives Donald Hall's thirteenth collection of verse, *Without*, is familiar even to many casual readers who do not pay much attention to poetry.[3] In January 1994, Hall's wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, was diagnosed with leukemia. In April 1995, she died in their bed at Hall's ancestral farm outside Wilmot, New Hampshire. These are only the facts. The poems in this book offer up all of the intense living and

[3] WITHOUT, by *Donald Hall.* Houghton Mifflin Company. $22.00.

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dying that filled those last sixteen months. They also help us to understand the extraordinary partnership, based on work, sex, and an abiding mutual respect and kinship, that endured for twenty years. The title poem is really a sequence of poems that mark the progress of Kenyon's illness and the heroic, desperate attempts to save her.

> Daybreak until nightfall,
> he sat by his wife at the hospital
> while chemotherapy dripped
> through the catheter into her heart.
> He drank coffee and read
> the *Globe.* He paced; he worked
> on poems; he rubbed her back
> and read aloud. Overcome with dread,
> they wept and affirmed
> their love for each other, witlessly,
> over and over again.

The book concludes with a series of letters Hall wrote to Kenyon in the year after her death. This chronicle of goodbyes, of grief and survival, cannot fail to move readers. Yet despite its universal themes, the artistic success of *Without* was no sure thing. In fact, to publish such a book at all amounts to taking a great chance. I have heard, on occasion, the book dismissed by some who have not read it on grounds that it must be sentimental. They are wrong. There are times, akin to walking out of a dark room into blinding sunlight, when we meet a true fellowship of art and life. I think of van Gogh's paintings, and try to imagine my response to them if I were ignorant of the details of his sorry life. Something essential would, for me (and I am sure for others, too) be lost. Very little art successfully risks sentimentality and self-pity to portray what George Crabbe called "the life itself." *Without* is art stripped of all artifice, which is to say stripped of all opportunities for dishonesty. Perhaps because these poems are so clearly life-in-art, and art-in-life, we cannot put them away, even though we might wish to.

If Expansive poetry calls for greater accessibility and a wide-open, historical eye, then Karl Kirchwey's place in that movement is assured.[4] His third book is a collection of formal invention and allusive delight. Taking its title from book one, chapter 21 in the book of James, *The Engrafted Word* covers a lot of territory, ranging from ancient Rome to contemporary Italy, to our current world of sonograms, barium x-rays, and casts for broken bones. In five balanced sections, Kirchwey grafts the past onto our present time, our presence onto the past, asserting by his practice that the key to such travel is poetry itself.

[4] THE ENGRAFTED WORD, by *Karl Kirchwey.* An Owl Book/Henry Holt and Company, Inc. $22.00; $12.00.

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Birth, and the rearing of children, launch and drive these poems from beginning to end. The poet-father's learning, his poise and his craft, are marshaled to explain the details, and evoke the mysteries, of a seamless world unfractured by the passage of time. To Kirchwey, the citizens of the ancient and modern worlds are one and the same. The fact that he explores ancient myths, meditates on great works of art, and moves under the surface of contemporary life aligns him with many diligent, post-modern poets. But the fact that he does so with unerring clarity, with intelligent astonishment, and with what one might even call reverence makes Kirchwey, and his verses, unusual. All parents should be concerned with how their children understand and relate to their world. Kirchwey's children, and readers, are lucky, for through a poetry of humility and grace he grounds their view in a sensibility that sees past and future as One, with the present an unobstructed highway between them. "Down such an avenue of red you came / three weeks ago today / . . . O rainy rose-gold prince, / lead us to kindness through the unaltered / kingdoms of innocence."

Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*[5] is the author's first novel in verse. If Karl Kirchwey wears lightly his knowledge of mythology, classical art, and the antique world, then Carson wears her similar interests like a heavy winter coat. Carson, perhaps more than any other writer discussed here, believes in the author's presence asserting itself, alternating as character and stage manager, in the text. Some will detect in this strategy a certain genius, while others will be bored by the self-conscious intrusions on the story being told. Readers in this last category will be irritated by apparatus—Appendix A and B, for example, and the brief interview concluding the book.

In an introductory section, Carson delivers background on Stesichoros, a poet born about 650 B.C., and one of his characters, Geryon: "Geryon is the name of a character in ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a very long lyric poem in the dactylo-epitrite meter and triadic structure. Some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half dozen citations survive . . . They tell of a strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle." Carson speculates on ways that Stesichoros, and now herself, might tell this story. Evoking Gertrude Stein, Carson argues that the fragments of Geryon's story can be arranged in many ways. Embracing this familiar modernist strategy, she chooses to update the myth, setting our winged, red character and his associates down in urban modern life.

The story of the sensitive monster, the outcast without a home doomed to wander the world in search of love, has been told most often in our time on television and in cinema. So the reader may be excused

[5] AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN RED: A Novel in Verse, by *Anne Carson*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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if memories of Rod Serling's "Twilight Zone," or the tortured image of Montgomery Clift as Geryon come to mind. But there are numerous literary precursors as well. Mary Shelley's famous monster, and Shakespeare's Caliban, are examples. More recently, one might think of Thomas M. Disch's protagonist in his novel, *The M.D.* The closest parallel, however, may be the character of Robinson Jeffers' Hoult in Part One (subtitled "The Love and the Hate") of his 1948 book, *The Double Axe.* In that landmark poem the lead character is literally a battlefield corpse returned to the living to bear witness against the hypocrisy of war and to take revenge against his corrupt parents.

Consistent with our own time, Carson's Geryon is not so dynamic. His crisis is all interior as he struggles to embrace his homosexuality and find a balance between his tenderness and the fact of his frightful physical appearance. The poem's greatest tension arises in those segments when Geryon and Herakles, almost always in competitive conflict, dance around the lust and ultimate meaning of their love affair.

There are many memorable incidents and inspired passages in *Autobiography of Red.* "She was standing before him now / smiling hard and rummaging in his face with her eyes" is one example; "Up on the overpass / the night was wide open / and blowing headlights like a sea. He stood against the wind and let it peel him / clean" is another. These lines are just right, outnumbering the occasional strained metaphor, as in "The sound of horses like roses being burned alive." When Carson breaks free of her weighty apparatus, and before the closing interview destroys the mood, her modern coming-of-age fable of urban angst and gay love is well worth reading.

Billy Collins' sixth collection, *Picnic, Lightning,* contains forty-five poems that will be familiar in content and execution to his growing number of readers.[6] "I like writing about where I am, / where I happen to be sitting," he says at one point. A random list of the poems' titles suggests the poet's point of view: "A Portrait of the Reader with a Bowl of Cereal," "I Chop Some Parsley While Listening to Art Blakey's Version of 'Three Blind Mice,' " "Shoveling Snow with Buddha," "Victoria's Secret," "Lines Composed Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey," "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," "The Death of the Hat." Irreverent, certainly. And for the most part, the poems deliver the goods.

> Give the rabbit the eye,
> And the duck waddles off the folio.
> Say, these could be our mascots, you and I—
> I could look at you forever
> And never see the two of us together.
> "Duck, Rabbit"

[6] PICNIC, LIGHTNING, by *Billy Collins.* University of Pittsburgh Press. $12.95p.

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Collins' domain is the lyric, his gifts an ability to recognize and put into poetry appropriate anecdotes that suggest a larger context, and a charming sense of humor. Like the early James Tate, Collins' poems seem to be almost effortless. No subject or launch point is beyond him, and he is not above turning a poem inside out for a laugh. "Victoria's Secret," for example, and "Paradelle for Susan" are *reading* pieces, poems likely to get big laughs on the lecture circuit. Like the Expansive poets, Collins writes in traditional and free forms for an audience that extends beyond the academy. For him the shadow is just as substantial as the object casting the shadow. The challenge for Collins now will be to avoid merely repeating himself, to eschew the instant gratification of an audience's cheers for the greater reward that comes from a poem like the marvelous "After the Storm." In this poem a party is interrupted by a power outage. The revelers retire, only to be awakened in the early morning hours when the lights and music come back on. "So the party resumed without us, / the room again aglow with a life of its own. . . ." Someone finally gets out of bed and goes downstairs to turn everything off. At that point, Collins makes the sort of leap that suits him, and for which we are grateful:

> even the ghosts of ourselves
> had to break up their party,
> snub out their cigarettes,
> carry their wineglasses to the kitchen,
>
> where they kissed each other good night,
> and with nowhere else to go,
> floated vaguely upstairs
> to lie down beside us in our dark and quiet beds.

Ten Commandments is J. D. McClatchy's fourth book of poetry, and his first since 1990.[7] This beautifully produced volume is organized into ten sections—corresponding to the Commandments—of three poems each, plus brief introductory verses that set the tone of the poet's response to the highlighted commandment in the following poems. It is a strict, intriguing plan, though for all its regimentation the book's concerns are more worldly than spiritual. McClatchy takes us on wide-ranging journeys that show us just how remote, in our daily lives, the voice and instruction of God, or any gods, can be. It is a poignant experience, witnessing McClatchy's success in creating an atmosphere in which one is willing to be amazed, to be guided by a greater good.

Like many Expansive poets, McClatchy's agility is most apparent in his range of subjects. In the fine "My Mammogram," the poet takes an

[7] TEN COMMANDMENTS, by *J.D. McClatchy*. Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.

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experience mostly exclusive to women and opens it up to involve men—all of us who must face the fact of our own mortality:

> In the shower, at the shaving mirror or beach,
> For years I'd led . . . the unexamined life?
> When all along and so easily within reach
> (Closer even than the nonexistent wife)
>
> Lay the trouble—naturally enough
> Lurking in a useless, overlooked
> Mass of fat and old newspaper stuff
> About matters I regularly mistook
>
> As a horror story for the opposite sex,
> Nothing to do with what at my downtown gym
> Are furtively ogled as The Guy's Pecs.
>
> But one side is swollen, the too tender skin
> Discolored. So the doctor orders an X-
> Ray, and nervously frowns at my nervous grin.
> Section I, "My Mammogram"

In the tough "Lullaby," McClatchy turns an often sentimental form on its ear: "Sleep, old baby, / Sleep your fill. / Sleep, old baby, / Sleep until / The dancers shout, / Sleep until / The stars burn out, / Sleep until / Tonight's boy scout / Gives you a hand, gives you a pill, / Lugs you up the flight of stairs." And in "Sniper," we observe a professional killer's rebuffed attempt at mercy in a Far Eastern jungle. With these and other equally surprising subjects, *Ten Commandments* is a more interesting read than most volumes of today's poetry.

The poems should also be admired for the formal skill that has gone into their making. If, on occasion, McClatchy describes too many of the mundane circumstances surrounding insight, as in the opening of "Tea with the Local Saint," in most situations the rigor imposed by the form he is working in, and his own high standards, produce delightful results. McClatchy's rhymes, especially, deserve special attention. It is unusual to go almost nine years between books. In McClatchy's case, it has been well worth the wait.

The same can be said about William Logan's new book, also his fourth, *Vain Empires*.[8] In fact, Logan has waited almost eleven years between book publications. This fact might, in part, have a lot to do with his status as a high-profile, honest reviewer of poetry. I have heard writers refer to him as "the most hated man in American poetry," a title one could be proud of in this time of fawning and favor-trading.

[8] VAIN EMPIRES. by *William Logan*. Penguin Books. $14.95p.

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This collection, as its title implies, will not make his detractors more comfortable. Much of Logan's poetry is driven by his wit and intelligence, and he seldom hesitates to direct them at our follies, our vanities.

> The crickets in the bind weed
> chirp like broken pipes.
> Stiffly we sit to pose
> for a late daguerreotype,
>
> but darkness now has stolen
> the light we need to see
> the lines upon our faces
> and guilts of property.
> "A Version of Pastoral"

But noting Logan's acerbic wit now almost amounts to a pat response to his verse. There is heart in these poems, a tenderness for which he is seldom credited. I encourage readers to spend time in the long poem, "Keats in India" (in which the doomed poet survives his illness), with "Van Gogh in the Pulpit," and with the dense sequence that opens the book, "The Secession of Science from Christian Europe." Logan understands the transforming power of traditional form, and is familiar with the profound insights that crystalize when personal experience is filtered through subjects—historical, or of-the-moment—that transcend the mere confession. Logan's command alone of his favored quatrains and other verse forms makes *Vain Empires* a rewarding experience.

I've implied throughout this chronicle that the detractors of Expansive poetry should read more of the work before wailing, and they could start with Logan's new book or, in fact, with all of the books I've discussed. Like it or not, the fact alone suggests a serious literary movement. The proof is in the written record, which already exists and is growing, and which only need be read.

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DAVID R. SLAVITT

Paideuo, Paideueis, Paideuei . . .

THE DECLINE IN THE NUMBER OF COURSES IN CLASSICS in our colleges and universities is such as to provide the occasion for expressions of dismay—or rage, or grief—from a relatively few civilized and literate people. In *Who Killed Homer?*[1] Victor Davis Hanson, a Professor of Greek at California State University in Fresno, and John Heath, Associate Professor of Classics at Santa Clara University, consider the discrepancy between the glory that was Greece and the deplorable condition on our campuses these days of Greek and Roman studies. "Between 1971 and 1991," they report, "the number of Classics majors dropped by 30 percent, as did Greek enrollments in the decade from 1977 to 1986. Of over one million B.A.'s awarded in 1994, *only six hundred* were granted in Classics, meaning that there are now five or six Classics professors in the country for every senior Classics major . . . " And they make a case that this is no trivial thing but symptomatic of a cultural sickness about which the public ought to be concerned. (Other reports seem slightly less gloomy. The number of students of Greek has been holding steady for the past dozen years at around sixteen thousand, and the figures Heath and Hanson cite do not count the enrollments in any interdisciplinary courses—of which they disapprove.)

What strikes me as curious, to say the least, is that it is only for the professionals on the campus that classical studies look to be ailing. Out in the world, the readership for the great works of Greece and Rome has never been healthier—Robert Fagles' extraordinary success with his translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has been such that the latest come-on from the Quality Paperback Book Club ("4 books. 4 bucks. No Commitment.") features these volumes at the very top of their list. New versions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are tumbling from the presses at an alarming rate. (I know, because mine is one of them.) Virgil is vigorous, Horace is healthy, and even Apollonius of Rhodes has reappeared in two new versions, one by Richard Hunter and another by Peter Green.

Hanson and Heath, however, are uninterested in such amateur activity. They look instead at the dismal prospects for university employment of graduate students in classical studies. But even in this dark picture one can see a bright side, for these young men and women, who are not morons, know what the odds are against them: they love Latin

[1] WHO KILLED HOMER?, by *Victor Davis Hanson* and *John Heath*. The Free Press. $25.00.

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and Greek enough to invest their time and energy without any realistic expectation of a job in college teaching; and it is only for the sake of the richness of the literature and history of Greece and Rome that they put up with professors whom they can see are running a Ponzi scheme and from whom they take abuse (and they can expect even more savage treatment later on from thuggish deans who will exploit them, shamelessly, offering them jobs as non-tenure-track adjuncts without health insurance or retirement benefits). Under such grotesque conditions, no one would decide to study mechanical engineering, say, but the attractions of Homer and Aeschylus and Ovid and Virgil are such that prospects keep showing up.

(Not all graduate classics departments are crooked and corrupt. I learned last year that at the University of Georgia they don't offer doctorates in classics—the credential for college teaching—but only master's degrees that qualify graduates for secondary school jobs, which haven't yet disappeared.)

This book, though, is more than a jeremiad about the decline of classics in our colleges and universities. The case Heath and Hanson make is much larger, for they proclaim that the values of the classical world are of universal relevance, assert that Western Culture is a Good Thing, and then insist that for it to continue, classical studies must continue. In practical terms what they are saying is that to maintain civilization as we know it, we must have more young men and women learning the rules for contraction of vowels in Greek verbs!

I am extending their logic only a little, for that is essentially where their argument leads. It is a quirky position to try to maintain, but in their obiter dicta they reveal what I take to be their real motives and underlying attitudes. They dislike the social sciences and hate the namby-pamby coddling of students or anyone else in the offices of therapists and counselors. What these whiners and complainers ought to do, Hanson and Heath declare, is just suck it up:

> Our therapists now talk of their remedies for stress, burnout, and midlife crisis. But these are mostly age-old and well recognized syndromes of the tragic, brief human struggle against evil—the Greeks remind us that often technological and material progress brings with it moral regress. The Greeks would say that our modern counselors themselves have now merely and unknowingly renamed an external malady: invent a new disease, then brag of its cure. . . . [B]elievers in modernism (who do not know Thucydides, Plato, and Euripides) have misunderstood the nature of man and the role of culture, and the proper balance between the two. As a result, they have not proved that we can empathize, excuse, counsel, talk, nurture, OK, or chicken-soup the demons out of any of us.

This seems simplistic and, toward the end, a bit vulgar—which is distressing because these are the very defects the authors claim that

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study of the classics can remedy. It is also irksome because Hanson and Heath continually misrepresent the Greek tradition to which they look for our spiritual and even our material sustenance. It is rather less splendid than what they are imagining. During the course of their very long history, the Greeks had about twenty-seven minutes of what we might think of as democracy (which, in any event, excluded the slaves who did much of the work). And their democratic procedures, even during that brief moment, could lead to such regrettable outcomes as the death of Socrates and the catastrophic Sicilian expedition.

Heath and Hanson, though, are not to be deterred by such troublesome details. They are like religious fundamentalists, brandishing Homer instead of the Bible (and their view of Homer is as partial as are the views of those Bible-thumpers who batter their scripture until it yields the curious conclusions they want from it).

What they are really talking about is moral education, and in this they remind me, rather, of Yale's President Noah Porter who thought the introduction of science into the undergraduate curriculum was a bad thing because it was likely to undermine the students' religious faith and their belief in God as the Divine Creator. Heath and Hanson may see Marx and Freud instead of Charles Darwin as the Great Satan, but their answer is almost as dotty as President Porter's when they suggest we can find our antidote to all the poisons of modern life in the hard truths of the Greek experience:

> Two hundred years of Romanticism with its faith in the primal scream, in man's fiery essence trapped and stifled in society's ugly plastic and aluminum, even the Enlightenment's absolute and haughty confidence in the salvation of man through pure reason devoid of custom, tradition, religion, and allowance for the inexplicable have nearly ruined us. We forgot what the historians Tacitus and Polybius taught us about the darker angels of our natures: true freedom is chaos; liberty without responsibility is more often savagery; a comfortable leash that does not chafe is better, safer for us all than the door of the cage thrown wide open . . . The therapist, counselor, and educationist in the university often consider simplistic anyone who adopts the Greeks' bleak view of human nature . . . Because life, then, is not nice, but tragic and ephemeral (Greek words both) . . . Everyone has a destiny, but that destiny can be improved or worsened, widened or narrowed, only by free will. The catalyst for that choice is character, *charaktêr*, or ethos, the Greeks' absolute stamp from birth that brings saints out of the ghetto and demons out of Beverly Hills. It is a pact with yourself, not an appearance for others. Did not the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus say that man's character is his fate?

Somewhere beneath this rhetorical excess (plastic and aluminum?), they are suggesting that what we need to keep us from falling entirely into perdition is a revival of classical studies. But is such a prescription

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comforting or at all persuasive? The late nineteenth century in Germany was one of the greatest moments in the history of the West for the study of Greek and Latin, but the German national character as it demonstrated itself in the twentieth century was nothing to boast about. By the study of classics at Oxford and Cambridge, generations of Englishmen prepared themselves for the foreign service—and the debacles of Africa, India, and the Middle East.

The practical advantages of the study of Greek and Latin are not, perhaps, its greatest selling point, but for such missionaries as Heath and Hanson the more plausible attraction—that it can be entertaining—is just not acceptable. Even in the face of declining enrollments, they are unwilling to be realistic and they are actually quite picky about the kind of student they are looking for. They have only disdain for such people as Professor George Goold of Harvard who said more than twenty-five years ago at an American Philological Association meeting:

> I think we are liars or fools or both, if we claim that the usefulness or relevance of classical studies constitutes the real reason why we cultivate them. . . . The real reason we study classics is its value: and that value is quite simply the pleasure it gives us. It is a pure, non-material pleasure, akin to the pleasure we derive from looking at pictures and listening to music; it is, for the most part, a passive, intellectual pleasure in which our spirits are—I will not say uplifted, though this is often the case—but enlarged and enriched by the experience of something outside what is strictly relevant to our personal concerns.

That seems about right to me, but their reply of almost sputtering outrage is:

> The American public then was supposed to pay materially for a few professors privately to enjoy a "non-material" pleasure. These self-styled elite Classicists—most not as candid or as honest as Professor Goold—shunned the task of winning new recruits to their "passive, intellectual pleasure." University and government money would always subsidize a tiny cohort of true Classicists, who could read Greek in tiny enclaves. After all, what was the alternative? "Classroom showmanship," "middle-class dutifulness," "being excited in class," and "pushing academic uppers," one Ivy-League Classicist scoffed recently. . . .

The position they are taking is strange enough to require some untangling. Professors from Fresno and Santa Clara, they evidently dislike and resent "elitists" from the Ivy League and object to the squandering of public or even private monies on anything as frivolous as "tiny cohorts" in their "tiny enclaves" sitting around and reading Greek—or, I shouldn't wonder, any poetry in any language—for the

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pure joy of it. This makes them, in Professor Goold's formulation, "liars, fools, or both," but what is more important to observe is that they are also snobs (albeit of the anti-elitist variety, closer to the Soviet than any Athenian model). For whatever reason, they are unwilling to recognize the pleasure principle, even though "hedonism" is a Greek word, too.

They also disapprove of intellectual uses other than their own to which the classics have been put in the past decade or two and point to these kinds of efforts as reasons for the decline in classics departments. They make easy fun of feminist revisionism, of gay studies inquiries (were Achilles and Patroclus lovers?), and even of linguistic and philological analysis, holding up for special scorn an interesting title by one S. T. Kelly, *Homeric Correption and the Metrical Distinctions between Speeches and Narrative* (New York/London, 1990).

"Correption" is a shortening in pronunciation, and it isn't a word one often sees, but what delights me evidently enrages Hanson and Heath—which is predictable in minds that are not only un-intellectual but actually anti-intellectual. What they know, they know, and anything else threatens them (which means there's a lot that threatens them).

Their no-nonsense, plain-folks insistence on the benefits of studying Greek and Roman culture seems not merely delusional but wrong-headed and even dangerous, for their earnest claims are like those that few philosophers dared to make back when they were the watchdogs of our ethics and metaphysics. These days, such staking out of the high moral ground is what one finds only among the faculty at Oral Roberts and Bob Jones Universities (at Catholic University and Notre Dame, or even Brigham Young, they have learned better manners). Such certitude in the war against Error and the promulgation of Truth, in whatever version it has been revealed, isn't the proper business of a secular institution but, conceivably, is what the adherents of a religion might undertake.

Hanson and Heath, *religieux manqués*, upbraid the Vatican for dropping Latin masses and chide Oxford University Press for bringing out an edition of the New Testament that is less nasty about blaming the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, and they try to affect a kind of populist heartiness as they declare: "A straight-flush Truth beats out a full house of 'hurtful language' and 'words matter' in every hand."

So the West is the Light and the Truth and the Way and all other cultures (not races, but cultures, they make clear) are losers. Greek is key to the triumph of the West, and if we keep on whittling away at our classics departments, we shall all surely be overwhelmed by lesser breeds without the law. These nutty ideas about the triumph of Good Western Greekness over Evil otherness, extend even to warfare and, in their strange formulation, Christian Soldiers become Greek hoplites in different but still recognizable uniforms:

> For Good or evil, in the modern age almost all nations that seek victory on the battlefield have had no choice but to adopt more or less

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> these general tenets of the Greeks' concept of decisive battle. They have in a sense become followers of Miltiades and Epaminondas, not of Persian Darius, Egyptian Pharaoh, or Vercingetorix the Gaul. Western military practice, with its age-old reliance on technology and discipline, has become an extension of free-market capitalism and constitutional government even in the modern non-European worlds to the east and south.

Immediate objections come to mind. Were the North Vietnamese, who defeated us, in any real sense "followers of Miltiades and Epaminondas"? Has China, our only rival as a superpower, distinguished itself as one of the prominent centers of Hellenic studies? Hanson and Heath's efficiently far-reaching answer is that the Chinese have been westernized, which is to say, whether they understand it or not, Hellenized. They have abandoned Sun-tsu and the Taoist paradigm and instead are poring over updated versions of Aeneas' text from the fourth century B.C., *On the Defense of Fortified Positions.*

This is so desperate an extension that one gives up entirely on the logical argument. The sad truth remains, however, that, for all their weirdness, Heath and Hanson are generally right about the general decline of classical studies—but the reason is much less complicated than anything they adduce. Classics departments are mostly uneasy alliances between Hellenists and Latinists, among whom there are men and women of quite different interests—literature, linguistics, archaeology, history and social science. The competition among the members of the department is keen and crass as those who offer courses in the different specialties try to fill their rosters and meet the dean's enrollment minima—from a smaller pool of students than that which presents itself to the English department. English, where they are reading stories and poems written in the students' native language and intended to be read by ordinary people for entertainment, is easier than Latin and Greek, where students have to learn conjugations of verbs and declensions of nouns and adjectives.

There are certain compensations, however. Students in classics are generally a little brighter and less lazy than those with whom the English departments have to contend. Students in classics at least know what an indirect object is and they don't have spellcheck programs they can blame for dumb mistakes (*to, too,* and *two*; *its* and *it's*; *their* and *there*) on papers they swear they have proofread. The canon in classics is fairly well accepted while in English the very idea of a canon is under attack (as the arbitrary and unjustifiable domination of elitist white European males) or, in some places, seems altogether to have disappeared. At the University of Virginia a few months ago, I heard about a classroom full of students in a women's lit. course who were reading *Frankenstein* but were totally ignorant of the fact that Mary Shelley's husband had been a writer, too.

It is difficult to disagree about the sorry condition of the classics, and

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indeed of all the humanities, on our campuses today. My own notion is that this is exactly what we ought to have expected. The real trouble is with the students, most of whom are there not to learn anything but only to be expensively credentialed into the middle class. If there is a waste of public and private funds, it is in this bizarre enterprise by which we try to effectuate a transformation from that working-class country we were before World War II to the middle-class country we have since then supposed ourselves to be.

From the time of the G. I. Bill onward, for a generation and more, colleges and universities enjoyed in an unprecedented period of prosperity and growth as the gatekeepers to that Cockaigne paradise where, as in Lake Woebegone, every child is above average. Predictably enough, that dream turned nightmarish, and those young men and women who were supposed to benefit from their parents' and the state's lavish investment in them not only didn't appreciate their opportunities but perceived their privileges as burdensome and saw themselves as victims. They took every opportunity to display their contempt for those bourgeois ambitions of their parents' generation, and they rejected any attempt to cultivate taste and judgment as elitist and exploitative. And now that they are members of the faculty, they still carry that chip on their shoulders of irrelevant parlor-Marxist protest.

In a better reasoned and much more persuasive book on a more general version of the same subject, *Literature Lost*,[2] John M. Ellis, professor emeritus of German literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz, describes the disasters that our campuses have become and puts the question:

> Who could have foreseen so complete a reversal that philistines who had never seen any value in studying Milton and Keats would eventually derive their most convincing arguments and draw their strongest support from professors of literature, themselves? Or that *they* would be the ones to tell the world that great literature, far from broadening the mind (as they used to say), actually narrows it by implanting constricting, socially harmful attitudes.

The situation is that the politics of race-and-gender resentment and the fashion for bourgeois-baiting have poisoned campus life. To make matters worse, these depraved and corrupt versions of humanist study have been institutionalized not only in new hires but even in the creation of new departments, so that the immediate prospects for any change are dim, indeed.

The only glimmer of hope I can see, for classics in particular or the

[2] John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (New Haven, 1997). Cf. Harold Fromm, "Humanities Beleaguered," *The Hudson Review*, Volume L, No. 4 (Winter 1998).

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humanities in general, is that there is an inherent fickleness built into academic life, an almost chuckle-headed trendiness that is the inevitable outcome of careerism. Ellis cites W. K. Wimsatt's dyspeptic remark, "New persons need new platforms," which he glosses by suggesting that the pressure to be original gives literary criticism "a proneness to fads and fashions." A new way of reading is an opportunity for the advancement of hordes of second-rate minds, of which there seems never to be a shortage. "The process," Ellis suggests, "is quite simple: one learns the terms and categories of the new fad and applies those terms to any text, and new thought seems to have been created."

He finds this kind of activity depressing, as of course it is. But that short attention span of the academic arena offers the only prospect for improvement. They are naughty children but they get bored quickly and may move on to different and less pernicious kinds of mischief. In a profession where there can be no appeal to common sense or decency, their narrowly focused careerism may, here and there, prompt intelligent discussion about literature, both classic and modern, which may be valorized again if only because of its rarity.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ANDREW HUDGINS' most recent book is *Babylon in a Jar* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).... LIZA KLEINMAN* completed her MFA in fiction writing at Indiana University in 1998, and is currently working on a collection of short stories.... BRUCE BAWER's book *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* is now out in paperback.... MICHAEL VAN WALLENGHEN teaches at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His most recent book, *The Last Neanderthal*, has just been published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.... SARA LONDON is a freelance journalist and art critic. Her first children's book, *Firehorse Max*, was a 1998 selection of the Vermont Educational Media Association and the Missouri State Teachers Association.... SYNDEY LEA's sixth volume of poems, *To the Bone*, won the 1998 Poets' Prize.... JOHN RIDLAND teaches in the English department of the University of California, Santa Barbara.... MICHAEL McFEE teaches poetry-writing and literature at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.... KAREN WILKIN's most recent monograph, *Giorgio Morandi*, was published by Rizzoli in 1998.

JOHN LOUGHERY's *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities* has been selected as a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate.... MARICA B. SIEGEL will teach Dance in the Twentieth Century during spring of this year at Mount Holyoke College.... BERT CARDULLO's collected film criticism from 1993 to 1998 is forthcoming from Edwin Mellen.... WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's collection of essays, *Talking Back to Emily Dickinson*, was published last fall by the University of Massachusetts Press.... ALEXANDRA MULLEN* teaches Victorian Literature at Providence College.... BROOKE ALLEN* is a frequent contributor to *The New Criterion*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Leader*.... DICK ALLEN's latest poetry collection, *Ode to the Cold War: Poems New and Selected* (Sarabande Books), was the 1998 Runner-Up for the Poetry Society of America's William Carlos Williams Prize.... SUSAN BALÉE participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar in "Literary Biography."... ROBERT McDOWELL's revised *Poetry After Modernism* appeared in spring 1998.... DAVID R. SLAVITT's most recent books include: *Epinician Odes and Dithyrambs of Bacchylides*, University of Pennsylvania Press, and *PS3569.L3* (poems), Louisiana State University Press.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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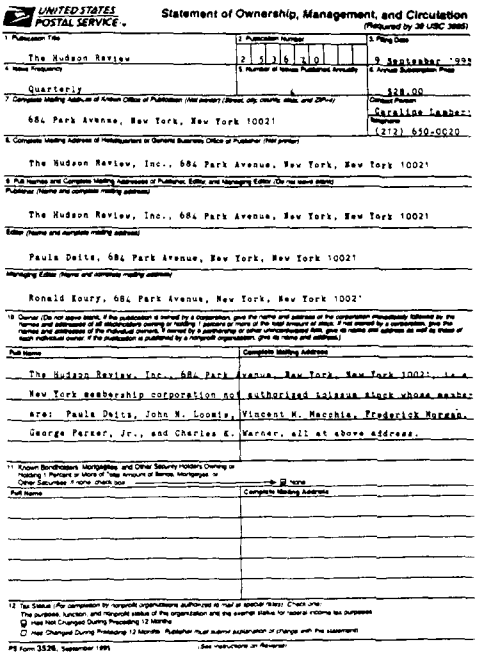

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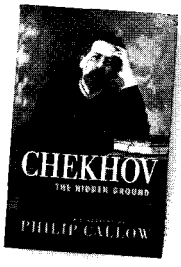

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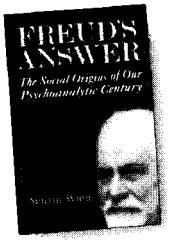

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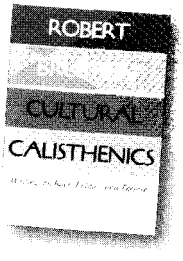

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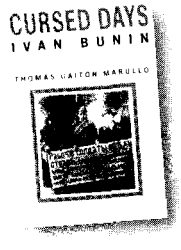

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